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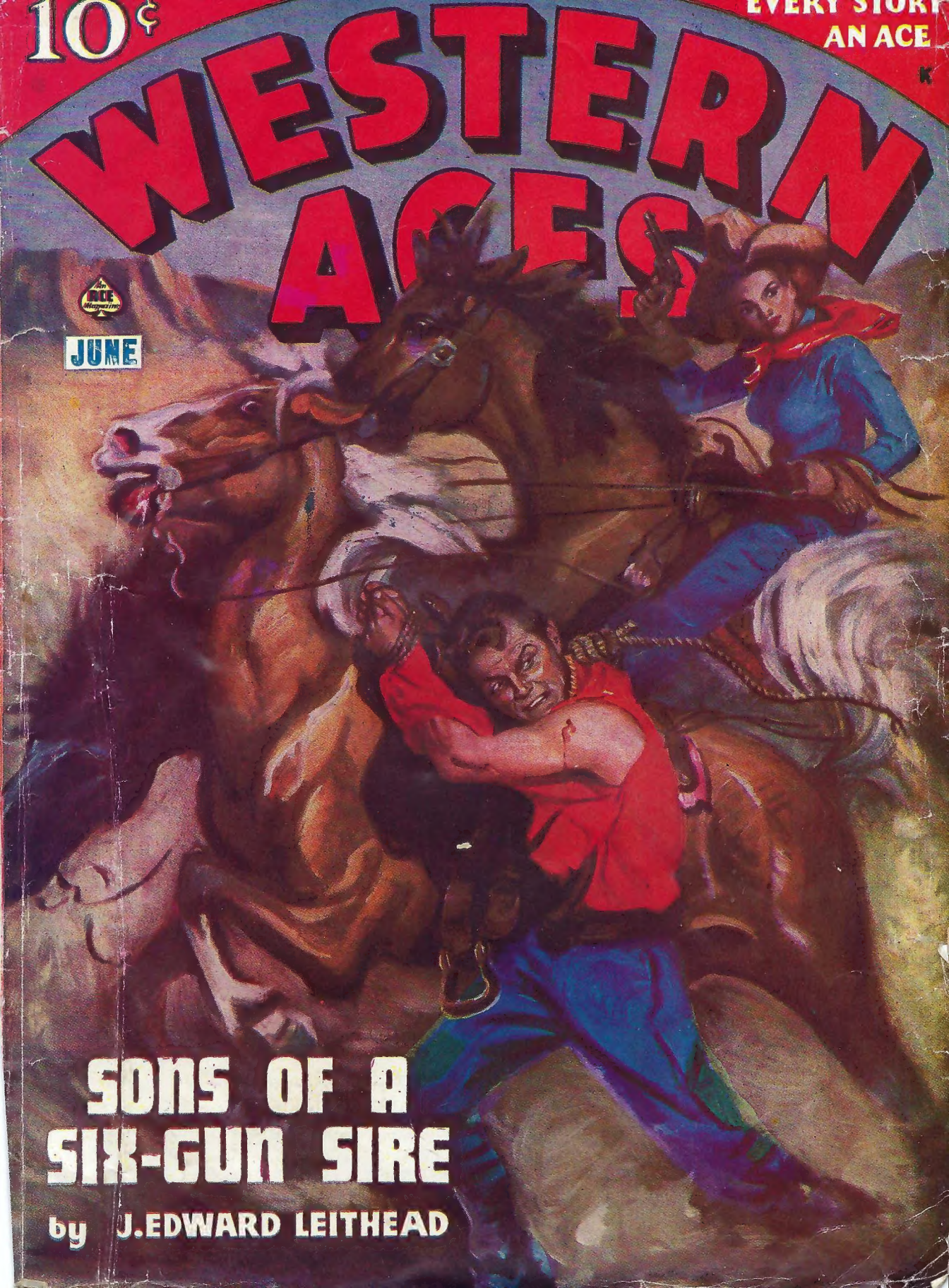
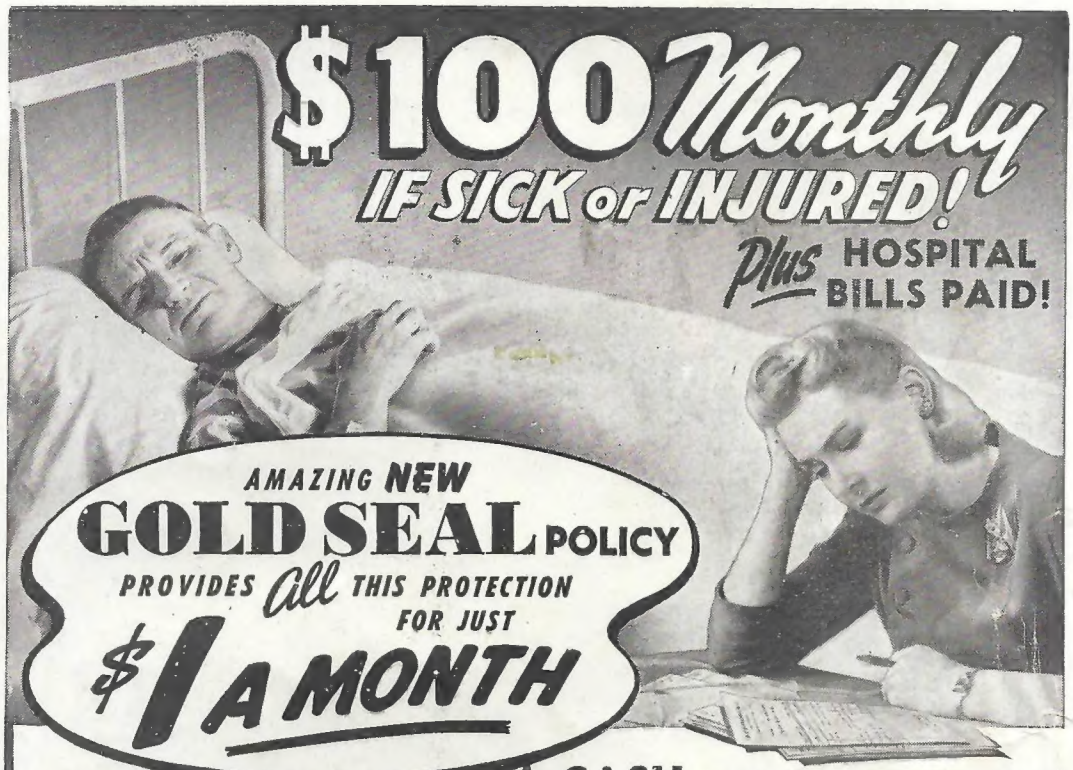
WESTERN ACES

JUNE



SONS OF A SIX-GUN SIRE

by J. EDWARD LEITHEAD



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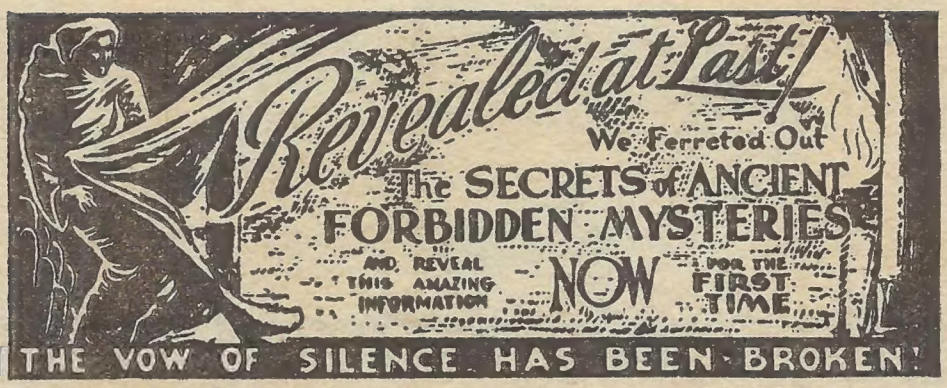

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JUNE 1946

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OKAY, DOC. SHE'S YOUR PATIENT
YOU'RE A LUCKY GIRL. NOT A SCRATCH
THE STORM'S OVER... BUT WHAT A MESS. WE'LL WORK ALL NIGHT IF WE HAVE A SHOW TOMORROW
WAS THAT NEW AERIALIST ON THE MIDNIGHT TRAIN?
THAT'S ONE ON YOU MATT. SHE'S THE GIRL YOU PULLED FROM THE CAR
SHOW TIME
YOU'RE A PLUCKY KID — SURE YOU CAN DO YOUR STUFF?
OH, I'M OKAY NOW... THANKS TO YOU
NOT MUCH TIME TO CLEAN UP, MR. HALE. "SPEC" STARTS IN 15 MINUTES
SOME BLADE, PIKE! MOST REFRESHING SHAVE I EVER HAD!
THAT'S A THIN GILLETTE. THEY'RE PLENTY KEEN AND EASY-SHAVING
YOUNG LADY, YOU'RE TERRIFIC. CONSIDER YOURSELF ONE OF US
I THINK I'M GOING TO LIKE THIS SHOW
MY HE'S SWELL-LOOKING
A THIN GILLETTE SHAVE DOES A LOT FOR A MAN
YOU GET FAST, SMOOTH SHAVES THAT MAKE YOU LOOK IN THE PINK AND FEEL THAT WAY TOO, WHEN YOU USE THIN GILLETTES. THEY'RE THE KEENEST, LONGEST-LASTING BLADES IN THE LOW-PRICED FIELD. ALSO THEY FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR PRECISELY AND PROTECT YOU FROM THE IRRITATION OF MISFIT BLADES. ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES
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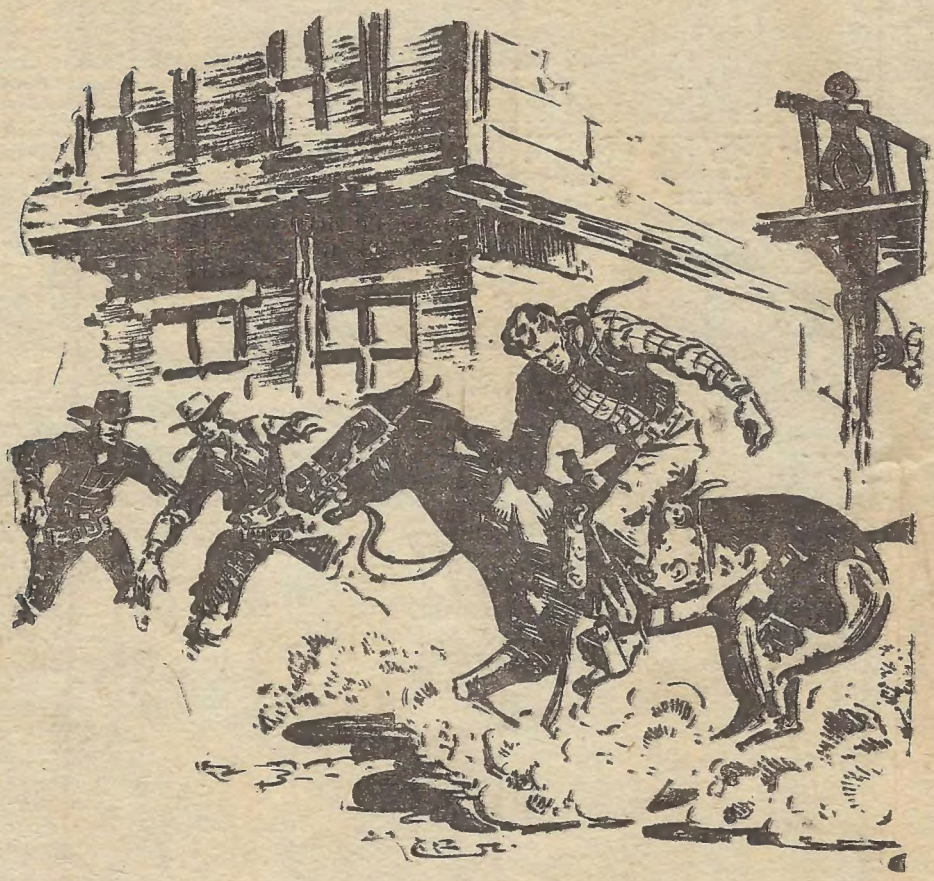
Sons of a Six-Gun Sire

Great Outlaw Novelette

By J. Edward Leithead



CHAPTER I

JOEL COLLADAY'S bronc jumped sideways with a suddenness that nearly threw its lithe-limbed rider. The young cowman grabbed for his six-shooter as he saw what had caused the animal to shy, three hard-looking men popping from the trailside mesquite. They bristled with guns, and Joel rocked his Colt hammer. But, half out of the saddle when he fired, his slug snarled past a barrel-chested bushwhacker into the thicket.

Two bullets missed Colladay as he struck the ground on the left side of his horse, clutching the reins. Before he had a second chance to smoke down one of the ducking trio, a Colt tuned up behind him. Dust flicked from the sleeve of his raised pistol arm. He wondered that the Coltman hadn't picked a broader target, his unprotected back, at the same time realizing he was between two fires with hardly a white chip chance. He'd been scouting the entrance to Pintado Valley to be sure the way was clear for his trail herd. But, expecting open opposition, if

When Joel Colladay tried to trail his herd nto Pintado Valley drygulchers had designed a bullet blockade to bar his way. And now it was up to Colladay to devise a pistol pattern to put wooden overcoats on back-shooting gunmen.

★ ★ ★

he met with any at all, these bushwhack tactics had caught Colladay off-center.

Hanging to his horse's bridle, Joel half turned to slash fire at the enemy in his rear. There were three of them, one stocky, square-jawed man a little better dressed than the rest. Joel's bullet raked hair from his spotted calfhide vest. An answering shot seemed to paralyze Colladay's gun-arm. His .45 spilled to earth. Sweat beaded his lean face as he awaited the bullet that would finish him.

"Get it over with!" snapped the cornered cowman. "I reckon Malden gave you rats your bushwhack orders!"

The stocky gunman's whitish brows knit above pale blue eyes. "Shootin' you is too easy, young fellow. We've got to make an example of you, warnin' other migratin' cowmen that Pintado Valley is closed range to outsiders. If we let you come in, a locust swarm would follow and put the first settlers out of business."

He crossed the road, his two ivory-handled guns at hip level. Abreast of him stalked his agate-eyed companions. As Colladay stood helpless, his elbow tingling where lead had grazed the crazy bone, the

trio who had first jumped him closed in, pushing his horse aside to prod him with six-guns.

Colladay's lip curled. "Sure you brought enough help to take one man? You the boss of these gunslingers?" He pinned frosty gaze to the thickset man. "I don't remember seein' you when I was up here a month ago to look over that government grazin' land."

"I was around," replied the Coltman. "Name's Cad Hobbs. A gun lawyer, you might say. I handle extra-legal matters for Fletch Malden, business that's outside Sheriff Daskam's jurisdiction. We expected to gather in your whole outfit. Where they at?"

"Down the trail," said Colladay, frowning. "I thought there might be trouble, considerin' Malden's broad hint, last time I saw him, that new outfits wouldn't be welcome up here. I didn't want my cattle scattered to the four winds, so came alone to look out the trail. Malden don't own that land on Lodge Pole Creek I leased for my herd. A cowman's got a right to take up new pasture if he's not crowdin' out someone else. I had to leave my old range because it was handed over to sodbusters. There was a dozen cattle spreads in the same fix."

"Malden knows that," nodded Hobbs. "Where'd they go, these others?"

"Two outfits trailed for Arizona, another for Old Mexico. I don't know about the rest. But they ain't with me, if that's what is worryin' Malden. I reckon he's afraid of competition."

"Whether he is or not," said Hobbs harshly, "Pintado Valley is takin' no chances of bein' overrun by homeless spreads. If it happens you're lyin' about bein' the only cowman headed for Pintado, your friends, when they come along, will find you here at the head of the valley, a warnin' to 'em to turn back. Fetch him over to the hangtree, boys."

CAD HOBBS turned on his heel, strode toward the tree Colladay had noticed before the attack, a stout-limbed oak standing like a sentinel to the right of the main trail to Pintado. Joel Colladay was young and craved his spot in the sun. If this was the end, he wished he had gone down with Colt bucking in his hand. He would have fought on if the gunslick Hobbs hadn't disarmed him with a trick shot.

As guns jabbed him to force him along in the wake of the stocky Coltman, he went suddenly berserk, lashing out at the men around him. Knocking one flat, he slapped down the gun barrel of another, attempted to snatch it from his hand as the muzzle was deflected. He wrenched the Colt away, spun it, with finger hooked in the trigger guard, to blast a hole in its owner. The latter jumped sideways, eyes bulging, as flame jetted from the gun. Blued steel cracked Joel behind the ear. He sagged forward, felt the weapon torn from his grasp.

Cad Hobbs had whirled at the sound of strife. He came striding back as the young cattleman hit the ground. "Tie his hands!" barked the gunman. "If I had my way, I'd beef him. But Malden gave strict orders not to kill unless we had to."

The next Colladay knew he was sitting under the hangtree, his hands and feet bound. Someone was drawing a noose tight about his neck. He was pulled upright, steadied by rough hands until the slack in the lariat, flung over a tree limp, was taken up.

He felt a steady, growing strain on his neck. His spurred boots cleared the ground. His chest was on fire, his eyes seemed bursting from the sockets as his wind was cut off. The shapes of men dimmed and everything went black. He was slowly strangling, not aware of the violent writhing of his body. He didn't hear the curt order of Cad Hobbs, watching his struggles with slitted eyes.

"That's enough! Lower him!"

Colladay flopped like a dead man at the foot of the oak. The hangnoose was loosened, his hands and feet freed. It looked for a moment as if he was too far gone to recover. But he began gulping in air with a sobbing sound, his eyes closed. Gradually the congested blood which had turned his face a purplish hue dispersed, his breathing became less labored. His eyes opened, to encounter the cruel eyes of Hobbs, bending over him.

"It's not many men who get hung and live to tell of it, Colladay," grinned the gunman. "You can thank Fletch Malden we didn't go through with it. He's an easygoin' man if you don't cross him too often. Jog back to your herd and drive anywhere you like but Pintado Valley. If you've any cattlemen friends trailin' this way, take 'em with you. There'll be a different endin' if you ever come back.

Bring his horse over to him, Shoop."

Joel had to be helped into the saddle.

"Give him his gun, empty," said Hobbs, "though he won't feel like usin' it for quite a while yet."

The young cowmen holstered the gun, le[illegible]d hard on the saddle horn. His neck [illegible]bed raw where the hemp cravat [illegible] deep. He looked half dead, all [illegible]es. There was unquenchable [illegible] he spoke to the gun boss.

[illegible]sh you'd killed me before [illegible] Hobbs. I'm a peaceful hom[illegible]on't stand for bein' put on. [illegible]en the last of me."

[illegible] the reins and his bronc moved [illegible]oppy run. He heard the wrath[illegible]ering of the men left standing [illegible] hangtree, but he didn't look [illegible]und. If they wanted to shoot him in the back, he was powerless to prevent it, too weak to throw a gun. But he went down the road and out of sight of the gun gang, his lean form humped over the saddle horn.

HALF an hour later, Joel Colladay trotted into the cow camp beside the trail. His thousand-odd cattle, of all ages, were grazing peacefully beyond the chuck and bed wagons. Pat McArdle, his foreman, and punchers not on duty with the herd, rushed up to help him down. They saw the mark of the hangnoose as they led him toward the fire, where coffee and frying beef were giving off appetizing odors, and began firing questions.

Joel sat down on a feedbox and talked until his trail crew knew everything that had happened to the last detail. He saw them unsheathing guns in the firelight and checking the loads.

"I reckon," Joel smiled thinly, "you're het up to strike the valley like a cyclone and clean it. Well, it does need to be cleaned of buzzards. This Malden evidently thinks he casts a big shadow where he walks. Maybe he's alone in opposin' newcomers, maybe his neighbors side with him. It's no matter. We've leased grazin' land on Lodge Pole Creek and we have a herd to get there safe. Pat, cut out a hundred and fifty head, the poorest stuff in the herd. I want three boys to go with me, Dooley, Ewing and Hurd."

"Why not me?" asked the foreman in surprise. "I got Colt savvy."

Joel grinned. "You may need it, leadin' the main herd to Lodge Pole by a roundabout trail. Four of us will drive the small herd toward Smokeridge, the cowtown, which is the shortest way to the leased land, the one we'd naturally follow. Malden and his gunmen probably haven't any idea how many cattle are in the Drag C herd. If we can fool 'em just long enough to trail the big bunch to the new pasture, I won't kick too hard over losin' the jag."

"That's an idea," nodded the foreman, "but you four are goin' to have a fight on your hands. Won't you need us to back you up?"

"You get the big bunch through, the longer way," replied Colladay, "and we'll do our best to hold the attention of the curly wolves and join you on the Lodge Pole tomorrow."

Supper was hurriedly eaten. It was thought best to move the cattle at once, before Malden's hirelings had a chance to spy on them. In that case, Colladay's trick wouldn't work. Joel, despite his rough experience, stepped back in the leather the minute he had finished eating. He helped cut out the hundred and fifty head which might have to be sacrificed, before night reduced the herd to a formless mass.

Bawling in protest at leaving the bedground after the day's long march, the decoy cattle shuffled up the north road. Hardly had the tail-enders disappeared in the darkness when another serpentine column, many times longer, started winding its way across low ridges in a northeasterly direction.

Dooley, Ewing and Hurd, the punchers Colladay had selected to accompany him, were young, tough and gunslick. He could count on them to the last cartridge if there was fighting, though Joel hoped the majority of Pintado Valley dwellers wouldn't side with Fletch Malden to keep him out. Such odds would be insurmountable even for a hard-bitten outfit like the Drag C, He'd have to feel his way, not burn powder indiscriminately. There must be some kind of law in the valley, for Cad Hobbs had spoken of a sheriff named Daskam. But Daskam might wink at the lawless actions of a big taxpayer like Fletch Malden.

Keeping the little herd moving at a shuffling walk, Colladay pointed out the oak tree where he had nearly done a wind jig. It was around nine o'clock when he spied the lights of the cowtown. The outfit drove steadily forward, intend-

ing to sheer off on the outskirts, perhaps halt for the rest of the night while Colladay sought the sheriff. It would take the main herd till daylight to reach Lodge Pole Creek.

The herd sounds traveled far on the night wind. Joel Colladay had no doubt the townsmen were aware of their approach some time before the point of the herd was within a quarter of a mile of Smokeridge. The night was suddenly split with the gun thunder and hoofbeats of charging horsemen.

CHAPTER II

COLLADAY yanked his six-shooter and turned in the saddle. The attackers had struck the drag-end of the herd, throwing it into panicky flight. Almost in a moment the orderly column became a confused mass of crazy cattle, plunging up the trail to town. Joel's mount, buffeted by bulky longhorns, nearly lost its footing. He lifted the reins high and lined out at a mad gallop, running with the lead cattle.

Joel saw he had no chance to start a mill. If he tried to cut across in front of the herd, firing his gun, he and the bronc would go down together. There were longhorns on both sides and behind him. The shooting had risen to crescendo as his cowhands swapped lead with the gunhawks, then the powder burning slackened. The roar of the stampede filled his ears.

The town lights grew brighter swiftly, and Joel found himself riding into the main street on the crest of a cattle avalanche. He saw blurred figures scattering through the dust, darting into doorways, going headfirst through windows. Sawing on the reins, slashing with spurred heels, Colladay swung his horse obliquely as he spied an alleyway. Glistening horns all but impaled his bronc as it clattered over the sidewalk and plunged into the passageway.

Joel reined in and turned his horse about. The Drag C cattle were streaming past the opening, smashing everything that stood in their way. The young cowman breathed a prayer that nobody would be trampled. The damage to property would be bad enough. He forced his horse into the street as the dust-filmed cattleranks thinned out. Dooley, Ewing and Hurd were pounding in the wake of the herd. Citizens were stepping cautiously from places of shelter. They began cursing the cattle drivers.

"Where's that gang?" Joel shouted, as his riders neared.

"Lost 'em backalong," replied Dooley. "They drove them cattle toward t[illegible] a-purpose, if you ask me. Boy, [illegible] tainly wrecked the place."

Colladay agreed with Do[illegible] had been no accident the [illegible] peded in the direction of [illegible] eye out for those lobos," he [illegible] ing his horse down the ho[illegible]

The cattle had almost re[illegible] ther end and citizens were [illegible] stop the horsemen. A tall [illegible] scraggly mustache, wearing [illegible] star, seized the bridle of Joel's h[illegible] voice crackled:

"You the owner of them cattle?"

"I am. Joel Colladay is my moniker. I take it you're Sheriff Daskam. Just the man I'm lookin' for." Joel slid ou[illegible] of the saddle.

"Hadn't you no better sense," snarled the sheriff, "than to bring cattl[illegible] so close to town? What started 'em runn[illegible]?"

"You heard the guns, didn't you, sheriff?"

"Sure. I suppose you were tryin' to mill 'em. I don't think anybody was killed, but you'll pay plenty for the damage your critters done."

Joel eyed him a moment. "Daskam, we had no chance to turn the herd. It was jumped by—well, I reckon I can name one of the parties, a two-gun hombre workin' for Fletch Malden—Cad Hobbs. After nearly hangin' me today, he warned me trouble would follow any attempt to drive my herd into the valley. Hobbs must've heard us comin' and ridden down to meet us. His plan wasn't merely to stampede the stock, but get the outfit in bad with everybody."

"I don't believe you," Sheriff Daskam stated bluntly.

"If you don't, it's because you don't want to!" Joel bridled. "You probably know I've leased government land on Lodge Pole Creek. I—"

"Hello, Colladay!" broke in a voice that struck unpleasantly on Joel's ear.

He wheeled to face the speaker, a well set up man of forty, clean-shaven, with cold gray eyes. From black sombrero to hand-tooled boots, his outfit was the best money could buy. Beside him stood the

stocky gunhawk, Cad Hobbs, thumbs hooked in gunbelts.

"Yes, it's me, Malden," returned Colladay, "in spite of all you've done so far to keep me out of the valley."

"It seems you're in trouble enough right now without my makin' you any," said the cattleman. "Goin' to hold the outfit till they settle for the damage, ain't you, Daskam? Several of the properties I own here in town will need new fronts."

"Sure, I'm arrestin' them," replied the sheriff. "He wanted to claim Hobbs had caused the stampede."

THE gunhawk was glaring at Joel. "He did, eh? Why, my friends and I were playin' poker with Mr. Malden in the Aces Up when the cattle tore in. Hand over your gun to the sheriff, Colladay." He glanced sidelong at Joel's cowboys, still in the saddle. "You others, too. We'll attend to roundin' up the cattle."

Colladay saw a climax in the smoke was imminent. "You a deputy of Daskam's, Hobbs, or hornin' in because you feel he can't handle it alone?"

"Never knew Daskam to need help," retorted Hobbs grimly. "But you can hand your gun to me, if it suits you better. Butt first, Colladay!"

He dropped right hand to six-gun hilt, extending his left, palm upward. Joel knew which end of his Colt the gunhawk expected to receive, that he had read Joel's resolve to fight in his chill glance. Hobbs was eager to cut him down. If ever a man needed killing, thought Colladay, it was the merciless Hobbs.

Cad held the slight advantage of having fingers curled on his gun butt before Joel's arm moved with a jerk. Yet the gunhawk, fast as he was, failed to get in the first shot. His eyes bulged with the impact of lead, a terrific shock which threw him off balance at the instant he thumbed hammer. His bullet ripped through Colladay's shirt on the left side, where it doubled over his wide belt. Hobbs started sinking, awkwardly trying to pull back the hammer of his .45. Joel shot him again, just in case he had the strength, for the gun muzzle was aimed at the young man's midsection.

Fletch Malden had moved aside in anticipation of the sudden gunplay. He gazed down at the fallen pistoleer with jaw sagging. Apparently he hadn't believed there was anyone quicker with a gun than his hireling. Sheriff Daskam also was staring with a half-incredulous expression. Colladay's cowhands, sixes bared, were alert for interference from the fringe of spectators, some of whom looked like gunhawks.

In the tense silence following Cad Hobb's fall, a girl pushed her way through the crowd. Her shoulder-length hair was crowned by a broad-brimmed hat with chin thongs; for the rest her garb included a beaded vest, corduroy skirt and star-topped boots. She stooped beside the dead gunslinger, then raised her eyes, large, dark and full of misery, to Colladay's face.

Without a word, she slipped her hands beneath Hobb's limp arms and commenced dragging him toward the curb, where a buckboard stood. Joel knew the vehicle hadn't been there when he dismounted. He took a step forward to give her a hand, but she shook her head, saying tersely:

"I can manage!"

Colladay saw he wasn't the only one watching her, with curiosity rather than sympathy. She displayed considerable strength in getting the heavy body into the buckboard. As she mounted to the seat and drove away, Joel shot a question at the sheriff:

"Is she Hobb's daughter?"

"Her name's June Shelton," replied Daskam gruffly. "Lives with her mother and four brothers on a little cow ranch in the Antler Hills, 'bout ten miles west of Lodge Pole Creek. They don't any of 'em come to town often. Now, regardin' your case, young fellow—"

"That's all settled," Colladay broke in, his gun at the ready. "I'm not liable for the damage done your town, seein' that my herd was purposely stampeded through it by some of your local bad hats. I'd suggest collectin' from Mr. Malden, here, although he denies any knowledge of it. And as for that killer I downed—well it was him or me."

JOEL had his eye on Malden as well as the sheriff. The cattleman shoved his hands in his pockets, obviously in a quandary, not caring to tempt Colladay to toss any lead his way. "If this fellow's settlin' on Lodge Pole, sheriff," said Malden, "we can take the matter up with him later on."

"Little good it'll do you," retorted Colladay, and turned to swing into the sad-

dle. "I'm tellin' you, Malden—don't crowd me!"

He trotted down the street, his punchers falling in behind, a little disappointed they hadn't had a chance to burn some powder. Angry voices arose, calling on Sheriff Daskam to stop them, but he evidently turned a deaf ear.

The cattle had cleared out of Smokeridge, scattered on the plain beyond. It took Joel and his punchers half the night to round them up. But that suited Colladay, for, meantime, Pat McArdle was driving the big herd unmolested to the leased land. In fact, his plan seemed to be working out better than he had hoped. The decoy herd had been recovered, and no Malden gunmen attempted further harassment of the Drag C riders, though they must have known the latter were gathering cattle a short way from town.

But one thing worried Colladay. He couldn't get that distressed girl out of his mind. She couldn't have looked more sorrowful if the slain gunman had been her father, yet their names were not the same. Joel hardly doubted that she was somehow related to Cad Hobbs. Perhaps he'd look up June Shelton and explain the circumstances of the shooting. She might not believe him, but there was pleasure in the thought of seeing her again, even though he was an unwelcome visitor.

The decoy herd began its march to Lodge Pole Creek an hour before dawn. It was midday when the leased land was sighted. For some time Joel and his cowboys had noticed a pall of smoke on the skyline. They thought it was a forest fire, though timber was scarce in the region. Colladay was appalled to discover the smoke rising from the lush acres of government land. His cattle, the main herd, were grazing on the south side of the creek, with riders lolling in saddles. The soiled covers of the chuck and bed wagons bellied in the wind.

Colladay urged his weary horse to a fast trot. The herders straightened up as they saw the second herd coming. Pat McArdle rode to meet his young boss, a look on his face that told the worst.

"I was wonderin' if I oughtn't to look you up at Smokeridge, Joel," exclaimed the foreman. "We got here without interference, but, by dog, the enemy was ahead of us. The grass was ablaze and nothin' we could do to save it. That range won't be fit for grazin' cattle this year. Not till grass grows again next spring. Joel, we're in a fix!"

Colladay sat rigid a moment, then struck his saddle horn savagely. "I see now why we weren't bothered while roundin' up outside of town! Malden sent his gunmen to fire the grass, a safe and sure way to keep Drag C from throwin' down in the district. Well, I'll probably have to sell the herd, because there's no place to graze it, but I ain't leavin' Pintado Valley. I don't suppose there's much the U. S. marshal can do, unless I have positive proof. Didn't see any of the fire-setters makin' off, Pat?"

McArdle shook his head. "Nobody, Joel. But the grass didn't take fire itself. When you have time I want to hear what happened at Smokeridge."

The second herd was turned loose to graze with the first, on range untouched by the flames, lying outside the boundary of the government land. No doubt it belonged to some neighbor of Malden's, who would presently order the outfit to move on. Discussing the situation with his outfit during the noonday meal, Joel surprised them by saying he had a little business to attend to in the Antler Hills before trying to sell his cattle in Smokeridge. He might not be in shape to do it later.

"It's that girl who carried away the dead gunman," Dooley said to his companions, watching Colladay saddle a fresh horse. "The sheriff told him where she lived. He's worried over the killin' on her account. I'll be doggoned if I see any reason to apologize for shootin' a sidewinder like Hobbs, unless Joel's fallen for the girl."

CHAPTER III

RIDING west from Lodge Pole Creek, Colladay had no trouble in locating the Shelton ranch, once he struck the hilly region bordering the rolling rangeland. It was apparently the only cow outfit in that section of the valley. He saw a few cattle at a distance before he came in sight of the ranch house, which was badly in need of repair. There was a dilapidated barn, a corral with some of the poles missing. Joel frowned. These people evidently were in poor circumstances. Even though Cad Hobbs had been a killer, Joel had a guilty feeling that perhaps he had cut off their main support.

As the young cowman jogged toward the house, the girl, June, came out on the porch, followed by an elderly woman, taller than herself. There was no sign of the four brothers until Joel stopped his horse, brushing off his hat. As he started to speak, bronzed young men in careless cowboy attire broke around either side of the house. Evidently it was their intention to surround the visitor. One was of the same stocky build as the late Cad Hobbs, the other three were tall and rawboned like the elderly woman. Their rush was halted by a sharp outcry from June.

"Wait, boys! Hear what he has to say!"

"He's the skunk that shot pop, ain't he?" retorted the stocky youth.

"Yes, but—what was it you wanted?" June addressed Colladay.

Joel's hand had been hovering near his gun. "I learned your name and where you lived from the sheriff, Miss Shelton. This is a peaceful mission, if you'll let it be so. Do I understand from your brother's remark that Cad Hobbs was your father?"

She nodded. "He used that name to shield his family. No one around here knows that Cad Hobbs was really Cad Shelton. Being a professional gunman, he didn't want anybody taking revenge on us."

"A point in his favor," said Joel. "I felt sure he was a close relative when you took him away after the shootin.' It upset me some. I want you to know I'm not a killer. Your father used me pretty rough, and he was keen to drill me last night. Of course, I realize if there weren't men like Fletch Malden to hire men like Cad—"

"It's fair of you to try to excuse Pop," interrupted June, "but there just isn't any excuse for him. We don't blame you, at least I don't, Mr.—"

"Colladay, Joel Colladay." He glanced at Mrs. Shelton and her four sons, who had grouped themselves by the porch steps. "Sorry I had to be the one to end up the old man. Shootin' a man who's got a family is a heap different from downin' one who's single, in my opinion. You're in the cow business, ain't you?"

The stocky youth answered sullenly, "Yeh, on a small scale."

"Let me introduce my mother and brothers, Colladay," said June. "Mother and I never approved of Pop's profession. The boys—well, they sort of made a hero of him. The stocky one is Tod. The three tall ones are Oll, Whit and Zack. Won't you 'light and come in?"

The brothers looked round at her as if they would remonstrate, having set their hearts on shooting their father's slayer to doll rags. But Mrs. Shelton, whose face showed the strain of years of waiting for her husband to be brought home feet first, seconded her daughter's invitation. Joel dismounted and followed the women into the house, the Shelton boys slouching at his heels.

The living room was neater than the outer appearance of the house had prepared him for, with old-fashioned overstuffed furniture and a chromo or two on the wall. Anxious to make reparation for the elder Shelton's taking-off, Joel, seating himself, related his experiences since arriving in Pintado Valley. When he spoke of the firing of the grass on Lodge Pole, he saw their faces tighten. The Shelton boys, ranged along the wall, shifted spurred feet.

"If I can pin that on Malden, he'll have trouble with the U. S. marshal," said Joel. "Right now, the only thing I can do is sell off my herd, pay the hands and hang around to turn up the evidence. I don't know where I'll stay. Town's too hostile, thinkin' I owe money for property damage. What I started out to say is that when I get paid for my cattle, providin' Malden don't block the sale somehow, I'd like to do somethin' for you folks. Don't refuse me, now. It'll make me feel better about what happened to the old man."

June said emphatically, "We couldn't accept anything from you, Colladay. Pop was the aggressor. You've been treated shamefully."

"It's kind of you," added Mrs. Shelton. "But no, we couldn't—"

"Hold on," Tod Shelton broke in. "If he wants to do it, let him. We could use a little money to fix up the place."

"The boys are right," smiled Joel. "I hope you and your mother, Miss June, will come round to their way of thinkin'. I'll be back, soon as I have the money." He reached for his hat, on the floor beside his chair.

"If you're determined to do it," said June, "you must board here while you're—well, getting the deadwood on Fletch Malden."

THE Shelton boys made sounds of disapproval. Oll, one of the tall brothers, said sharply, "It's too far from Malden's ranch to keep an eye on him."

"That doesn't matter," June said firmly. "Colladay shall make this his headquarters, if he wants to."

"It'd suit me fine," declared Joel, his eyes on the girl as he stood up, hat in hand. "No tellin' how long I'll be, gettin' rid of the cattle, but I'll turn up sooner or later."

June and her mother offered their hands, and the boys, taking their cue from this, shuffled forward, but there was no friendliness in their darkly tanned faces. They gave Joel a chilly feeling, yet he thought he understood. Admiring their father's gun prowess, the four were not as ready to forgive and forget as the mother and sister. Colladay forked his horse and rode away from the Shelton ranch, well satisfied with the result of his visit.

A day or two later he went alone to Smokeridge to look up the local cattle buyer. McArdle and the hands wanted to go along, but Joel refused. One man might dodge trouble where a dozen couldn't. Besides, he wanted a full crew guarding the herd, for the owner of the range had threatened war if they didn't get the Drag C cattle off his land.

Colladay hit town on a blistering afternoon, when few people were abroad. He stopped at the postoffice to mail a letter to the U. S. marshal and to question the postmaster. Obtaining the name of the cattle buyer, Joel rode upstreet to a little office on the ground floor of a brick building. Mr. Delbert was a rotund little man with side whiskers, who didn't look as if he'd know a longhorn from a shorthorn. He was quite ready to buy, but drove a hard bargain. Joel had to accept; there was nothing else to do. And half a loaf was better than none.

"Cars will be ready in three days," stated Delbert, "and I'll pay cash the minute the cattle are loaded. You've got a lot more than went through the town the other night."

"They're all mine," said Joel. "You won't let Malden change your mind about this? What he fears most is competition."

"Fletch is not running my business," replied Delbert stiffly.

Colladay saw the sheriff and several citizens staring at him over a saloon doorway as he jogged out of town. He was a little surprised they didn't raise a hue and cry, for he was certainly recognized.

The Drag C outfit started the cattle drifting toward Smokeridge in time to meet the cars spotted at the railroad siding on the third day. Everything had run so smoothly in dealing with the cattle buyer that Joel half suspected a trick. But when he saw the waiting stock cars, he figured he'd been too distrustful. While his men were loading, he sold his wagons to a man who owned a wagon yard. He was breaking up his outfit temporarily, and it would be cheaper to buy new wagons than pay for keeping the old ones somewhere until he was ready to resume business.

Leaving his cowboys at the loading pens, Colladay pointed his horse for the cattle buyer's office. He wasn't expecting trouble as he jingled in, carrying a nose bag to tote away the cash Delbert had promised. The plump little man nodded quickly, his side whiskers trembling, as Joel told him the last beef critter had been put aboard the cars.

"Yes, yes, I'm sure it's all right," said Delbert. "The brand inspector was there to check up. I'll pay you, Colladay."

DELBERT began heaping packages of greenbacks on his desk. Joel reached to stuff them into the nose bag. Delbert moved back toward the wall, his eyes narrowed. The young cowman thought it a funny move, until the connecting door suddenly opened. Sheriff Daskam and Fletch Malden stepped into the office, trailed by townsmen and some of the late Hobbs's gun pals.

"You can leave the dough lay, Colladay!" snapped Daskam, hand on six-shooter. "I'm attachin' it to pay for damage done to the property of Smokeridge citizens by your stampedin' herd. The bill is just twelve thousand dollars, the amount of the sale. It was easier to handle it this way than seizin' your cattle."

Joel jerked his gun, a deadly light in his black eyes. "So that's the reason I had no trouble puttin' over the deal! You think you've got me goin' and comin,' don't you, Malden? You burn the grass on Lodge Pole so I have to sell the herd, then you and your friends aim to rob me by a false claim for damages!"

Malden sneered, "I supposed you'd

think I started that blaze, but I didn't."

"Just like you didn't order my cows hightailed through town!" snarled Colladay. "Line up by the wall, all of you! You, too, Delbert! I should've brought my outfit, but anyway they're in earshot of a gun blast if I need 'em!"

He was crouched to kill, with the desk between him and the wavering group. No man apparently wished to take a chance on grabbing iron and being the first to drop. They shuffled backward until their shoulders pressed the wall. With his free hand, Joel scooped up the greenbacks. When he had tossed the last package into the nose bag, he grasped the rope at the top and retreated toward the door. As he felt behind him for the doorknob, he detected a streaking hand.

One of Malden's gunmen triggered and ducked out of line. The bullet hit the door as Colladay pulled it open. The cowman's swinging Colt belched flame. With the death rattle sounding in his throat, the gunslinger folded. Colladay whisked through the doorway, half fell down the steps in his haste to dodge other lead coming after him.

Joel shot into leather. His horse was running before his right foot found the stirrup. Hanging the money-filled nose bag on the saddle horn, he guided his mount with one hand, wielded gun with the other as his enemies poked their heads out of the office door. A gunman thrust a long arm around the doorframe, unleashing bullets that whined too close for comfort. Joel, twisted in the saddle, threw a shot which tore away one side of the brutal face. The killer's body sagged outward and rolled down the office steps.

Lining out for the stock pens, Colladay saw his men scrambling into saddles. A glance rearward showed Malden, the sheriff and others rushing from the cattle buyer's office, now that Joel was beyond six-shooter range. They didn't mean to let him get away, that was sure, but they'd need horses to follow. Colladay yelled for his punchers to come along as he swept by the railroad siding. Pat McArdle soon caught up with him.

"I see you got the money," said McArdle. "But what's the ruckus?"

Colladay told him, while they raced clear of town, the other Drag C men spurring in their wake. "There's one last thing you can do for me, Pat. Lead that bunch in one direction while I go another. If you keep far enough ahead of 'em, they won't know I'm not with you."

"We'll do it," declared Pat, "but we'd just as leave make a stand with you. Might be a good idea to cut down the odds for you some."

"Nope. Don't want the sheriff or Smokeridge citizens killed." Joel dipped a hand into the nose bag. "Here's cash enough and over to pay off you and the boys. When I get things straightened out, I'll send for you."

"We'll quit any jobs we're holdin' to come back," assured McArdle. "Hate to quit you, Joel. You're a good boss. So long—and luck!"

CHAPTER IV

FROM a wooded knoll northwest of Smokeridge, Joel Colladay watched the sheriff's posse pound southward on the trail of his cattle crew. The Drag C men had a good lead and it was unlikely the pursuers would overtake them. Joel hated to part with his outfit, but there was no telling how soon he would be running a brand again. He turned his horse down the hillside, feeling sure the way was open to the Shelton ranch. It would be dark before he reached there. He didn't want Malden or anyone to know he was still in the country, not until he had planned what to do.

While he jogged steadily onward, the sun set and night approached. Big boulders loomed in the starlight beside the ribbon of trail. Joel's thoughts centered on June Shelton. If he was late for supper, probably she'd dish him up some leftovers. He reached into his shirt pocket for the makings, then his hand slid suddenly for his six-gun. His horse had thrown up its head, snorting, as three bandanna-faced men stepped around a boulder.

"Don't reach!" warned one in muffled tone. "Toss off that nose bag!"

Joel couldn't make out the figures very well in the shadow of the big boulder. They had him dead to rights. "Some of Malden's gang, eh? Thought you skunks had all ridden the other way."

"Cut the talk and hurry up!" rapped the holdup who had spoken before.

Colladay threw the nose bag into the trail. Hoping their greedy eyes would follow it, he flicked out his gun. A Colt bellowed as he pulled trigger. Lead fur-

rowed his arm, the sharp pain causing him to drop his six-shooter. One of the holdups grabbed the nose bag, another snatched up Joel's .45 and flung it over the boulder. The third brought horses forward. They all stepped into saddles, whirled and galloped off through the boulder field.

Knotting a handkerchief around his bleeding arm, Joel dismounted to look for his gun. He was furious that Malden had outwitted him. The rancher was nothing but a crook, sending three of his hirelings to hold up Colladay. It was certain the Smokeridge citizens with damage claims would never see any of the money. Joel wondered how the trailers had discovered he wasn't riding south with his cowhands. Striking matches, he found his six-shooter in a weed patch and ran back to his horse.

Riding at full gallop, the robbers had put a good distance between themselves and the cowman by the time he hit leather. Joel tried to follow the faint hoofbeats, but his overworked horse began to stumble Any hope of overhauling the other animals faded. Colladay reined around to finish his ride to the Shelton ranch.

The cheerful sight of windows glowing in the dark raised Joel's spirits. He rode around to the corral at the back. Black shapes were outlined against the peeled poles, he caught the click of a rising gun hammer.

"Hold it!" he called. "Joel Colladay comin' in."

"Okay, Joel," answered Tod Shelton's voice.

The next minute Colladay was dismounting, with the four Shelton boys grouped about him. He noticed their saddles piled on the ground.

"Been ridin'?" he asked.

"Just in from the range," said Tod. "Sell your cattle already?"

Colladay exploded as if they'd put a match to him. "I did, and had the money stolen by three of Malden's sidewinders on the way here!"

WHILE he stripped the gear from his horse, he explained fully. He retold the story to June and her mother when he went to the house, Tod and his brothers following him in. None of the Sheltons made much comment. Joel thought the brothers were disappointed he hadn't brought the money he had promised.

"I'll get it back from Malden, be sure of that," Colladay asserted. "I haven't forgotten what I said when I was here last."

"Please don't mention that, Joel," said June. "Mother and I didn't want you to do it, as you know. We were waiting supper for the boys, so you're in luck. Sit down everybody."

Pushing his chair back from the table, Joel fashioned a quirly, drew in a lungful of smoke. He looked at the Shelton brothers.

"How'd you four huskies like to give me a hand recoverin' that money? There's no use goin' to the sheriff. He wouldn't believe Malden robbed me. Or if he did, he'd refuse to help me. I'm not askin' you to gamble your lives against the Malden outfit. In fact, I don't want Malden to know you're with me or he'd be over here with a posse. All I want is for you to keep a lookout while I'm interviewin' the boss."

June paused in removing the dishes from the table. She glanced at her brothers, but didn't say anything. Joel wondered if she was worried about them tangling with the powerful Malden. The boys looked at one another and grinned. Finally, Tod spoke.

"I reckon we might give you a hand, Joel."

"If June don't object," said Colladay.

"Oh, no," said the girl, switching dark eyes to the cowman. "It's up to them. They never listen to anything Mother and I say."

Colladay picked the next night for visiting Malden's big ranch down the valley. The stockman might be in town, but Joel would have to take that chance. The Shelton brothers acted as guides, for Joel had only a hazy notion where the outfit was situated. Reining up in cottonwoods bordering a creek, Tod Shelton pointed out the ranch house where Malden should be found if he was at home. Lighted windows at the front seemed to indicate he was. Joel swung down, tied his horse to a tree.

"You fellows scatter between the main house and the outbuildings," he said. "If you see anyone comin' to interrupt Fletch and me, let go a warnin' shot and try to hold 'em off while I'm gettin' out of the house. That is, if you can do it without showin' yourselves in the light. And

if you have to shoot, shoot high."

"Quit worryin' about us," chuckled Oll Shelton. "We ain't babies. Fletch would be surprised to know we're his old pistoleer's young'uns. Chips off the old block, too."

Colladay, as he walked beside their horses, away from the trees, was a little worried they might take the opportunity to prove what good shots they were by knocking over a few Malden cowboys. He didn't want to start them on the gun trail. The riders sheered off as the ranch house reared thirty or forty yards to the right, and Joel walked alone, taking advantage of every patch of shadow till he was close to a window.

Peering in, he saw Fletch Malden seated in a leather-covered chair, reading a stockmen's journal. Joel stepped softly to the screen door. It creaked a little as he opened it. Gun in hand he faced Malden as the latter glanced over the top of his paper, suddenly hurling it to the floor with an oath.

"Thought you'd skipped the country, Colladay!" he exclaimed.

"Sit still!" warned Joel. "Anyone in the house but you?"

"Suppose I say yes, what'll you do?" Malden's cold eyes rested an instant on his gunbelt, looped over a chair-back, well out of reach.

"If you'd said no, I might believe there was somebody. At any rate, we'd better not be interrupted. Guess you know what I came for, Malden. That cattle money your hirelings stole off me last night."

The stockman shook his head. "You talk crazier every time we meet. I haven't got it."

JOEL nodded toward a safe against the wall. "We won't argue. You wouldn't be likely to deposit that money at the Smokeridge bank, because the townfolks might hear about it. Go over to that safe and get it out quick. I've no time to fool."

Malden reddened with anger. "I didn't rob you, Colladay! Sometimes people call me high-handed, but—"

Joel walked over and prodded him to his feet. The blazing black eyes had almost as much effect on the rancher as the blued steel deathspreader. Cursing, Malden moved ahead of Colladay to the safe, dropped on his knees and began twisting the dial.

"I keep some money here," he growled, "but not near as much as was stolen from you. When you see it ain't here, maybe you'll believe me."

The safe door swung open. Joel was watching to see he didn't grab a pistol that might be lying inside. Intent on the cattleman's movements, he failed to hear the soft chiming of spurs outside the house. But as the screen door slammed, he jerked around. Two of Malden's hardfaced gunmen stood just inside, so dumbstruck by the tableau that their mouths hung open.

"Here's that Colladay again!" roared Malden, facing around.

Joel didn't waste time wondering how these men had entered without the Shelton brothers observing them and sounding a warning. He felt, rather than saw, Malden rise stealthily to grapple with him. Swinging half around, Colladay slashed him over the head with his six-shooter. At that moment the Coltmen came out of their trance. Both were unslinging guns as Joel swiveled. Fire licked from his Colt muzzle and a rat-eyed killer tottered. The young cowman broke for the door, lancing flame in answer to the other gunslinger's rapid shots. They hit each other, but Joel reached the door on his feet. The Coltman, trying to turn about for a last shot at him, sprawled on a bearskin rug and didn't move.

Colladay, leaping from the ranch house and down the porch steps, saw and heard nothing of the Shelton brothers. He could hardly believe they had been captured without putting up a fight. Sprinting toward the cottonwoods, Colladay was relieved to discern his horse standing where he had tied it.

Malden had run out of the house and was yelling as if the gunplay hadn't already roused everyone on the ranch. Joel, swinging to saddle, held his horse with a firm hand, puzzled at the non-appearance of Tod and his brothers. If they weren't prisoners, it was strange they hadn't headed for the cottonwoods, as prearranged, at the outbreak of trouble.

About a score of men responded to the boss's shouting. Colladay saw him pointing toward the cottonwoods. They raced away for mounts. Joel didn't like to go without learning what had become of the Shelton boys. If they had been trapped, he ought to stand by them. But when he heard Malden's cowhands thun-

dering up the yard, he opined he could do the brothers no good by lingering. He'd come back at a more favorable time if they'd bogged down in trouble on his account.

Joel eased his horse into the creek, making no more noise than necessary. But the mob of cowboys heard him and wasted lead on the cottonwood trees as they rode full tilt for the spot. Joel had forded the creek and turned southward before they could get up in gunshot. He had no intention of leading them toward the Shelton ranch. It was the beginning of a long race that ended in the foothills, where Colladay doubled on his trail, leaving the stockhands to comb the hills by daylight if they wanted to wait that long.

It was growing light when he urged his jaded mount over the last half mile to the Shelton ranch. He spied four drooping horses in the yard as he swung toward the house, four booted and spurred young men dangling their legs over the edge of the porch and calmly smoking. He pulled up before them, asking:

"What in thunder happened to you fellows? I was afraid you were locked up somewhere at Malden's!"

CHAPTER V

TOD SHELTON spat out the stub of his cigarette. "You should ask, Joel! We didn't see anyone go into the house after we left you, but we knew somethin' was wrong when the shootin' started. If you hadn't been so squeamish about our pottin' a few snakeheads, I reckon we could 'a helped you at the outset."

The other three nodded solemnly.

"Yeh," said Oll, "that cramped our style. While we were arguin' what to do, some cowpoke spied us. Next thing we knew, a dozen of 'em had cut us off from the creek. We had some ridin' to do to keep ahead of that bunch. Took all night to shake 'em and circle round for home."

Colladay couldn't doubt, from the condition of their mounts, that the animals had been ridden hard and long. But he had heard no sound of a chase before Malden's cowhands started after him. At that moment the front door opened and June looked out.

"Did you just get back?" she asked. "I was awake half the night."

Joel wondered why she didn't ask if they'd been successful. "Your worryin' was needless, June. But we came empty-handed."

June looked at him a moment, then said, "Unsaddle and come in to breakfast."

Colladay knew it would be fatal to make another visit to Malden's ranch for the purpose of recovering his stolen cattle money. The rancher would be on guard against further intrusion. Not knowing what to do, Joel hung around the ranch, disliking to partake of the family's rather scant fare without paying for it. He offered to help with the range riding, but the brothers didn't seem inclined to take him up.

One afternoon, Colladay was mending the corral fence, having nothing else to do. He paused in his hammering as a big longhorn broke over a rise, running as if to escape a rider. Joel saw no one after the steer, but he knew three of the boys were out on the range. Tod was in the house.

Observing that the runaway longhorn would pass near the corral, Colladay dropped his hammer and grabbed the catch-rope from the gatepost. There wasn't time to rig a mount, but Joel figured he could head off the critter without one. He waited at the corner of the corral, twirling the lariat, so the longhorn wouldn't see him too soon and swerve. As the steer lumbered within reach of the forty-foot rope, Joel darted out, making his cast. At that instant a gun banged in back of Joel. The bullet dug up a little geyser of dust a few feet to his right.

Colladay had noosed a foreleg of the running longhorn, but he threw down the rope and whirled, slapping leather. He stood and stared at the struggling figures in the back doorway of the house. Tod and June. The girl was trying to wrest a smoking gun from her brother. Colladay walked slowly toward the house, forgetting the steer.

"What's up?" he asked sharply. "Who were you shootin' at, Tod?"

June jerked away from Tod, with the gun in her hand. She faced the cowman, her eyes round with fear, Joel thought. "Why," she panted, "he was—it was the steer, Joel—"

"Sure," interposed Tod, "it was the steer I aimed at, Joel. Fool thing to try

and rope one of them critters on foot. I was goin' to kill it before it gored you. But sis caught my arm, throwin' my aim off. She was scared you were too nearly in line with the critter and I'd hit you instead."

"Came pretty close to me," Colladay said grimly. "I've roped longhorns on foot before, when a horse wasn't handy. Anchor the whale line on your hip, dig in with your boots, and they go down like a sod house."

He noted the girl's pallor as she silently handed Tod his sixshooter. The longhorn hightailed through the yard. A rataplan of hoofs heralded a horseman. Oll Shelton was tearing past the corral, whacking his mount with a rope. His brother, stepping down from the doorway, shouted as Oll galloped by:

"Can't you keep them wild ones where they belong?"

"Critter quit the bunch we were drivin'," Oll yelled back, and disappeared around the house in a cloud of dust.

JOEL was more disquieted by the incident than he showed. He believed that Tod would have killed him but for June. Tod hadn't wanted him to see the brand on that steer. Which meant the brothers were rustlers, and perhaps didn't confine their stealing to cattle. It was a blow to Colladay, although he hadn't had any particular liking for Tod, Oll, Whit and Zack. But he loved their sister and respected their mother.

When he noticed how June and Mrs. Shelton watched the boys that evening after supper, Joel wondered if it wouldn't be a good idea to leave while he was all in one piece. Because of the women, he didn't want to be forced to shoot up the brothers. He should have expected outlawry to crop out in a gunhawk's brood.

Undecided whether or not he would return to the ranch, Joel saddled early the next morning, to ride down the range and think things out. What if it hadn't been Fletch Malden's hirelings who had held him up? Now that he thought of it, in a calmer mood, the stockman had seemed to speak the truth in denying the theft.

Colladay had covered several miles, riding aimlessly along the road toward Malden's, when a placard tacked to a tree caught his eye. He reined in and scanned the notice, learning, to his astonishment, that Fletch was offering $1,000 reward for his capture. According to the poster, he had robbed Fletch's safe of several thousand dollars. Joel's lips puffed with anger. Just then hoofbeats reached him. He twisted in the saddle. The four Shelton brothers were riding around a bend in the road.

Joel waited for them, a gleam in his eye. They rode up with grins on their faces, grins that weren't wiped out as Joel pointed to the reward notice, asking:

"Know anything about this? I never got a dime from Malden."

Tod said, "Yeh, we saw it a day or two ago. The range is plastered with 'em. If you didn't get that money, who did?"

"You did, you double-crossin' whelps! You let Malden's gunmen surprise me, then, when that cowpuncher gang took after me and the house was empty, you went in and helped yourselves to the cash. The safe was open." Joel stabbed for his gun, held the draw as Tod barked:

"Whit's coverin' you! You're good for the thousand, dead or alive!"

Whit had sneaked out his gun while Joel was looking at Tod. The other three quickly filled their hands. Tod, pushing his horse closer, lifted Colladay's sixshooter from leather.

"You're goin' to Smokeridge with us," said Tod, his voice hardening. "We're collectin' that thousand. Followed you from the ranch to take you, knowin' my mother and sis would put up a kick if we did it at home."

"They would, bein' the only good ones in that rattlers' nest!" gritted Joel. "You take after the old man. Tod tried to kill me yesterday, afraid I'd discover you were rustlers. And I reckon it was three of you stuck me up for that cattle money. One of you didn't play a hand because I might suspect it was you four. Must've been spyin' in town that day, to know I got the money."

"Prove it!" snapped Tod. "Meantime, get goin'!"

Joel turned his horse and rode along with them, knowing their guns would begin smoking if he didn't. In silence they traversed another mile or two, then the dust of horsebackers in front attracted their attention. The brothers called a halt. Tod suddenly exclaimed:

"It's Malden and a sheriff's posse! That's all right. We won't have to go

to Smokeridge. Deliver the prisoner right here."

When Malden and Sheriff Daskam caught sight of the disarmed Colladay in the midst of the Shelton brothers, they whooped in triumph.

"Where'd you catch him?" cried the cattleman. "Although I offered a reward for Colladay, I told the sheriff we ought to do what we could to run him down ourselves. He's a menace to honest folks."

"We gathered him in up the road a piece, lookin' at one of the posters," said Tod. "We get the reward, don't we?"

"Certainly," replied Malden. "As soon as we get to my ranch."

"Malden," said Colladay, "do you know who these fellows are?"

"Sure, the Shelton brothers."

"The Shelton brothers," nodded Joel, "sons of Cad Shelton, the gunman who called himself Cad Hobbs."

THE stockman's eyes jumped to the bronzed, youthful faces. "Is that true? Never thought Cad had a family."

Tod grinned. "He was tryin' to protect us, 'specially Mom and June. Us boys wasn't ashamed of the old man's rep."

Joel said grimly, "That's no lie, seein' that they've been followin' his example. Understand, Malden, that don't apply to the mother and sister. I've been livin' at the Shelton ranch. If it wasn't that I'm in a tight, I wouldn't tell you this; but I suspect these boys are cow thieves, that they stole money from you and me both. What made you think I robbed your safe?"

"You dodged the boys who went after you, then went back into the house and cleaned the safe. I discovered it just as you were ridin' off the second time. There was me and a few others about who gave chase, but we lost you."

Joel shook his head. "Your outfit pressed me so hard I had no chance to double on them till I was miles south of the ranch. These boys were with me that night. They kept out of the way until the house was empty, then slipped in and grabbed the cash. They must've separated afterward, makin' you think you were chasin' only one robber—me. But I was miles away at the time."

Malden looked incredulous. Sheriff Daskam scratched his head, eyeing the brothers, who gave no sign of uneasiness.

"It sounds like a wild yarn," said Fletch. "Have you any way of provin' what you say, Colladay?"

"He's tryin' to talk himself out of a mess, Malden," said Tod.

"Why not go to the Shelton ranch and search for the stolen money?" suggested Joel. "And I believe there's cattle on their range whose brands won't stand inspection."

Daskam said, "Maybe that's where your stock's been disappearin' to, Fletch. Any objection to searchin' your house without a warrant, Tod? If so, I'll get one."

"Nary objection," replied Tod, but Colladay thought all of them looked uneasy for the first time.

The cavalcade got under way, holding to a steady lope until they drew rein in the Shelton ranchyard. Tod and his brothers were out of saddles in a split second.

"We'll tell Mom and June what's comin' off," Tod called over his shoulder, "so they won't be scared."

"Hold on, now!" shouted the sheriff, pulling his gun; but the brothers were across the porch and inside before anyone could stop them.

"You ought've been a little quicker!" snapped Colladay. "We can't shoot if the women are in there. Satisfied the brothers are guilty, Malden? If you are, I'll take the gun Tod gave the sheriff."

"It looks bad," muttered Fletch. "Give Colladay his smoker, Daskam."

Unheeded, the horses of the brothers had trotted down the yard, to stand at the corral gate. All the possemen swung down and walked slowly toward the house. Tod Shelton yelled from a window:

"Better not try to break in! Mom and sis are standin' by us to the last ditch!"

Joel Colladay flung out an arm to halt the possemen. "I was afraid they'd defend the worthless skunks!"

WHILE the men stood irresolute, Colladay caught the sound of wheels and trotting horses. He faced down the valley and suddenly leveled an arm.

"Look! It's Mrs. Shelton and June in the buckboard. The boys were only bluffin' to keep us from attackin'."

A gun blared at a front window and Joel spun half around. But he didn't fall. Next moment he was leaping for the porch, landing on it asprawl and creep-

ing up to the window where Tod or one of the others had fired at him. Malden, the sheriff and all the possemen had followed Joel's lead. Three or four flung themselves against the door.

"It's bolted good!" cried the sheriff. "Get a ram!"

Joel had raised his head, fired into the front room without drawing a return shot. He crawled to the end of the porch, suddenly rose to his feet. "They're at the corral!" he yelled, and vanished along the side of the house.

The Shelton brothers, leaving by the back door, were swinging to saddles. They began to shoot as they saw Joel coming. Lead smashed into the house wall as he crouched to let drive. His first bullet knocked Tod Shelton off his horse. Tod rose again, reeling a little, blazing away at the cowman.

Colladay thumbed a shot that stretched him on his back. Tod drew up one leg and lay still. A bullet intended for Oll struck his horse. It reared up and the rider lost his stirrups. As he flung down in the dust, throwing lead at Joel, the latter drove a bullet through the crown of Oll's hat. He rolled on his side, his gun silenced.

Colladay was moving forward, slashing fire. Whit's and Zack's horses were picking up speed. Whit slid limply from the saddle, with Joel's last bullet through his neck, as the possemen came tumbling from the porch. They delivered a volley that brought down Zack and his horse in a kicking tangle. A little longer and he would have been out of range.

Malden and the sheriff stopped beside Colladay, as he leaned against the house. "I'm all right," he said, and faced the other way at the sound of hurrying feet. "Here come the mother and sister! This is goin' to be the hard part!"

Mrs. Shelton passed the three men without looking at them, half running, crying aloud for the sons who were beyond recall. June, her eyes swimming, paused in front of Joel, who found it hard to meet her gaze.

"You're not to blame, Joel," she said. "They robbed you, tried to kill you. In revenge for Pop's death, they fired the grass on Lodge Pole Creek. Mother and I pleaded with them—it did no good. Their first wrong step was rustling. This morning Mother and I made up our minds. After they'd gone, we got the money stolen from you and Mr. Malden out of the trunk in their room. We put the nose bag in the barn under some hay, drove to Malden's with the other money and left it in his rural post-box, where he'd find it when he got his mail. I suppose you'll be leaving us, Joel—"

"Not if you can forgive me for—" Colladay nodded in the direction of the corral, where lay the stark figures of the gunhawk's sons.

"It's the other way around, Joel," said June.

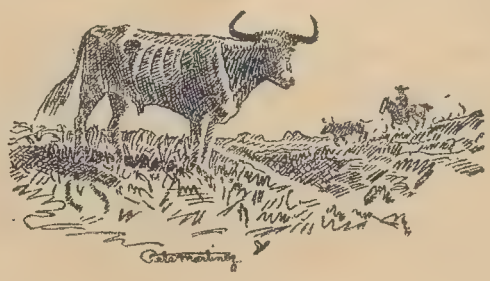
"I think so, too," put in Malden. "I've gone the limit myself tryin' to drive Joel out of the valley. Actin' like I owned the whole range. He won't be bothered by me any more if he wants to stay and raise cattle. I don't reckon you'd take my hand, would you, Joel?"

"Yes," said Colladay, "for I'm settlin' on Lodge Pole soon as the grass grows again, and I like to get along with my neighbors."

He shook hands with Malden. The latter nudged the sheriff.

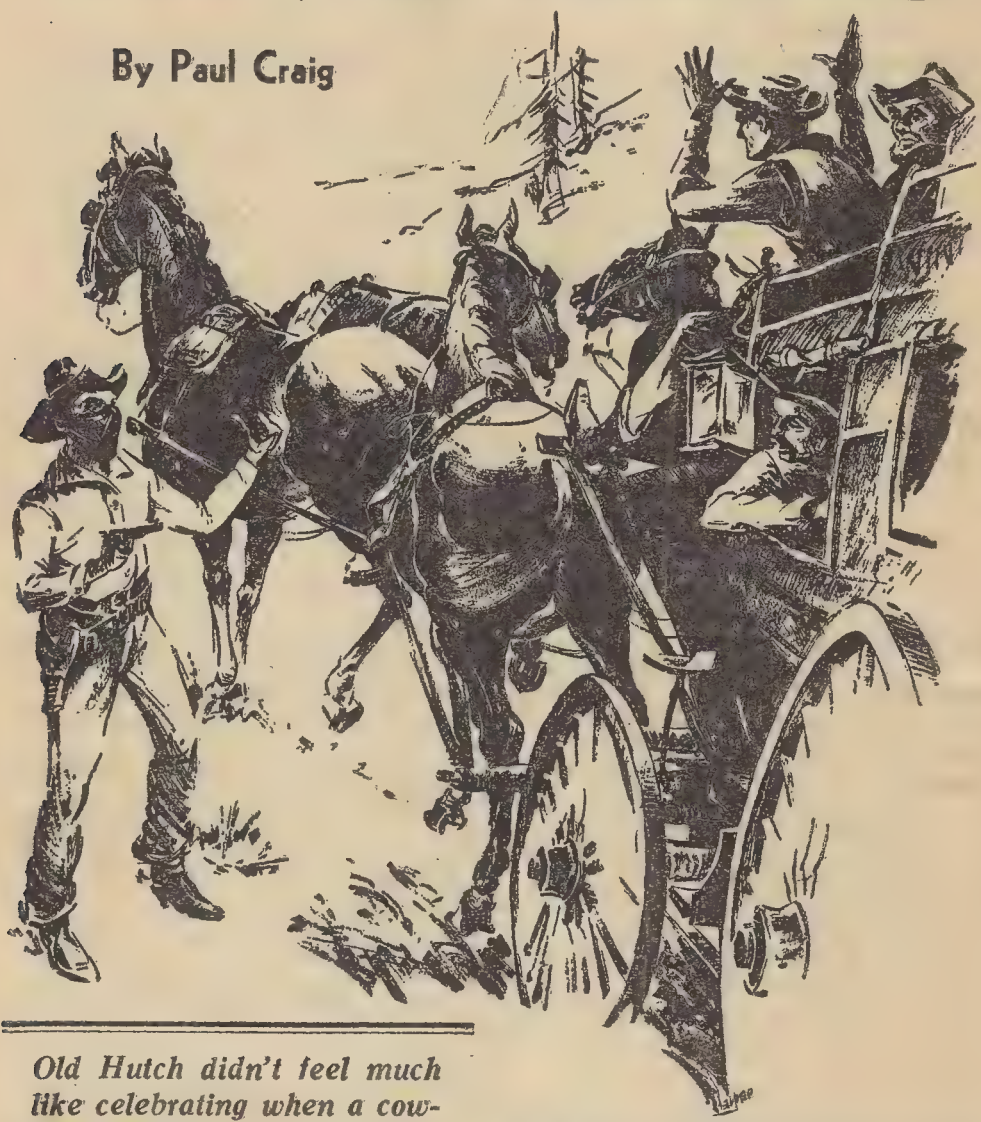
Left alone with June, Joel drew her into his arms. She was sobbing and he shook her gently. "You couldn't help what your father and the boys were, June. If you love me, let me see you smile."

June raised her head, brushed away her tears, lips curving. "Can you doubt it, Joel?"



Dude Trap Boomerang

By Paul Craig



Old Hutch didn't feel much like celebrating when a cowman neighbor was framed for stage-robbing. But when all the sidewinders of the region got together to throw a party over it, Hutch figured on joining that jamboree decked out in his best bib and shootin'-iron.

HUTCH slept late that morning, which was the privilege of an old cowman who has made his little stake and retired to a two-bit place on Digger Creek where he can have a few head of stock and a garden and leisure and peace. That is how it was that he failed to see the law officer earlier, riding out to the Diamond B and coming back pretty soon with young Dex Bagley. In fact, it was past noon before he got a glimmering of what had happened, when

the sheriff came out again specially to see Hutch.

"Old-timer," Tom Chown said summarily, "if anybody was to've seen Dex Bagley come home last night it'd be you, the road running so close to your house and you a light sleeper and all. He says you might've seen him and noticed the time. Did you?"

"Well, somebody went by on a slope, last night," Hutch answered, misgiving rising in him. "Who it was or what time it was is something else again." It was the kind of question for which a man liked to know the reason before he answered. He hoped Chown didn't notice his evasiveness and believed he wouldn't for this sheriff had a peculiar, one-track mind.

Chown nodded and turned toward his horse, anxious to raise dust again, "Well, that was Bagley's only chance. Who you heard could've been anybody. I don't figure it was Dex Bagley."

"Look here!" old Hutch protested. "What's happened to Dex?"

The sheriff turned again, grinning. "He's got hisself in the hoosegow, that's what. Somebody took the mining company payroll off the midnight stage, last night. Up in Goose Hollow."

"Lots of folks know how to get to Goose Hollow. Been there myself."

Chown frowned, not liking the heavy sarcasm. "I know what you're thinking, Hutch. Dex's old man went up for the same thing four years ago. But, like father, like son, as the saying is. Anyhow, what one man's done successful some other man's bound to try. Maybe more so when it's father and son. This is one time I'm going to prove lightning can strike twice in the same place!"

"Never knowed it to happen," Hutch ruminated. "You figure you can send Dex up on the strength of his pa's being convicted of robbing the stage that other time?"

The officer grinned. "No. On the strength of the same kind of evidence, though. Dex claims he was drunk last night. I reckon he must've been not to think of his heels. Or else he's plenty smart, which is the way I'm betting. After Bill Bagley's trial, every man in the country knows about Bagley's weak ankles and how they run their boot heels over. And there's plenty of them tracks up in Goose Hollow this morning. Dex made 'em." He looked at Hutch in self-appreciation.

He saw a very old man with a frowsy thatch of white hair, a big hooked nose and a pair of knifelike black eyes. Old Hutch snorted. "You're playing the tarnation fool locking Dex up on evidence like that! After the hullabaloo raised about Bill Bagley's heels, do you reckon his boy'd wear run-over boots on the same kind of a job? It's another frame-up, just like the one that sent Bill Bagley to the pen!"

Chown grinned. He was a chunky, round-faced individual, and now he was pretty sure of himself. He would have made a better law officer, old Hutch figured, if he would study his case, and then pick his suspects, instead of picking a suspect that satisfied him, and setting out to build a case around him. He had gained a lot of notice for his work in sending Dex's dad to the state pen on the strength of a pair of run-over boot-heels.

Lots of men had weak ankles in this cow country where a man was likely to get on his horse to ride out to the woodshed. The defense lawyer had contended at Bill Bagley's trial, until it was shown that Bill's boots exactly fit the imprints found at the scene of the holdup. Then it had been argued that someone might have worn them, trying to railroad Bill, but that couldn't be proved and carried little weight.

"You're getting pokey in the head, Hutch!" Chown said expansively. "I figure that's where Dex Bagley played smart. After his pa's case, they're sure going to yell frameup on this one. Dex probably figures he can get off, because it don't make sense he'd do a thing like that. Folks just don't believe lightning can strike twice in the same place. I always say that what one man's got away with to his profit, some other man's bound to try. More so if it's father and—"

"Yeah, I know," Hutch cut in annoyedly. He watched the sheriff ride away, then turned back toward the porch, apprehension mounting.

IT WAS going to be another hot day. Excessive heat always made him enervated and irritable. The hot night had kept him from sleeping well, which was how he happened to hear the rider thundering past. He had no idea who it had

been nor what time it was. Now he wished frantically that he had determined that. He let his mind run over it again and again.

Old Hutch and Bill Bagley had been neighbors for many a long year. Hutch had been one of the few who stoutly believed the elder Bagley innocent of the charge that had sent him to the pen four years earlier. As firmly now he believed Dex innocent. Yet there was a vicious solidity to the idea Chown had broached, that Dex might have duplicated his father's alleged crime, carefully leaving the same kind of evidence, so that it would smell of a frameup and likely get him off.

Old Hutch straightened in his chair as if somebody had triggered a scattergun behind him. Dex had brooded continually over his father's fate, and now this Prendergast girl had come into it. Maybe he'd cooked up some wild stunt like this try and throw doubt on the old case against his father, hoping to get it reopened. Far-fetched as it seemed, Dex was the hot-headed, brooding sort who might try something like that!

Old Hutch sighed. In spite of the heat, he was going to have to make the long ride across the hot flats to town. Presently he went down to the little peeled-pole corral below the house, caught up a horse and saddled it. He strapped on his old Peacemaker, swung into the saddle as likely as a sixteen-year-old boy, and headed for Round Up.

It was when Hutch saw the Crowbar cattle high on the plateau around Lamp Chimney Rock that he remembered the little incident on Digger Creek. Hutch liked to poke along the creek when the weather was cool enough for a man to stir out. That day a couple of weeks before he had been coming downstream on the west bank of the creek. He saw this Tony Prendergast fishing down below but thought nothing of it, for Prendergast was often to be seen along the creek, even if his spread was over across the Blues.

Prendergast was fishing the big pool below the falls. Hutch had not thought to stop and chin with him, for he did not like Prendergast and the man had not seen him.

It didn't make sense that a man wearing heavy gum waders would deliberately jump into the pool. It was because he was certain the man had jumped in, instead of slipping, that Hutch did not rush down to help him. Prendergast went off a rock, floundered a little in the swift current, then cut for the bank again in clean, powerful strokes. When he crawled out, Hutch saw he had kicked the rubber boots off.

When he fished Digger Creek, Prendergast usually walked as only a dude would, and there he was in his wet socks. He gathered up his tackle and headed eastward. Hutch had been further puzzled. It was closer to Hutch's place than to Dex Bagley's Diamond B, yet Prendergast had headed toward Dex's.

Remembering that, now, old Hutch whacked his thigh and wagged his head. But he was glad his memory hadn't been jarred in time for him to tell that to Sheriff Chown. Yet the chances were a thousand to one that Dex had lent Tony Prendergast a pair of boots to walk home in. But why hadn't the knot-headed young galoot told Chown, right off?

The answer to that was not long in coming. Justina Prendergast, Tony's sister. The two were Easterners. They had bought the big Crowbar outfit a couple of years before. Dudes, old Hutch always called them, and he didn't like them very well. They sat a horse funny, they wore dude clothes, and did a lot of fancy entertaining of local bigwigs and friends from back East. They sure didn't know much about cows. All the old-timers around figured they were bound to go broke. Tony Prendergast had been around enough, though, to have heard the story about Bill Bagley and his alleged stage stickup.

TOM CHOWN hadn't beaten Hutch to town by very much, and didn't object to his visiting the boy. Soon Hutch found himself alone with Dex in one of the cells.

Dex Bagley was in his middle twenties, tall and lean. His rugged young face was already etched with too many lines. Hutch noticed his eyes were bloodshot. His mouth was now hard and bitter.

Hutch got to the point. "Well, did you do it?"

There was deep bewilderment in Dex's eyes. "Hutch, I don't know."

Old Hutch snorted. "A man ought to know whether he stuck up a stage or not!"

Again the boy shook his head and wrinkled his eyes, like a man trying desperately to recall something lost to him. "I got a snoot full last night. When I do that, I pass out on my feet. Sometimes I keep going hours without remembering a thing about it afterward. I was in Jack Pattee's Blue Cat last night about eight o'clock, and that's all I know. But I'll tell you one thing! I wish I had! I wish I had a long time ago! If I'm going to be the first hombre this country thinks of every time a crime's committed, by jingo, I'd oughtta have the game as well as the name."

The old man sighed. He didn't blame Dex for this bitterness. Yet it showed him what a tremendous amount of harm had been done, even if Dex got off.

"What made you fill up on rotgut last night?"

"Well, I seen Justina in Berg's mercantile, and we squabbled again. She's always had a chip on her shoulder. I reckon it's like I always figured. She don't want anything to do with the son of a jailbird—or a man that's now a jailbird himself!"

Hutch did not try to correct Dex's impression of the girl; in fact, it would suit his purpose to get him even a little angrier. Now he asked:

"How come you never told the sheriff about Tony Prendergast borrowing a pair of boots from you, couple of weeks ago? He returned 'em yet?"

The boy's look was quick and cold, almost deadly. "You're crazy!"

"Could be. But this I seen. Tony Prendergast didn't fall in Digger Creek that day the way he likely told you. He jumped in and kicked off his boots. He didn't come to my place for a pair to wear home, but hobbled across a half mile of rough sod in his socks to get to your place. Why? He wanted your boots, not mine!"

Young Bagley climbed to his feet. "Hutch, don't you dare tell anybody else that!"

Hutch left, knowing he wasn't going to get very far with the boy. Before he left Round Up, he dropped in to see Jack Pattee in the Blue Cat Saloon. Pattee was a typical gambler, a man in his middle forties, and had only been in Round Up five or six years. Now he was impatient.

"I can't tell you any more about what Dex Bagley done last night than I already told the sheriff. Bagley was in here until nine-ten o'clock. Nobody knows just when. It was easy to see he had a pout on. He drank by himself and he got tighter'n a tick. Maybe he was planning to stick up the stage, I don't know. He left here in time to get to Goose Hollow before eleven-thirty, when it happened. What do you care, Hutch? He comes from a bad strain, and that's all there is to it!"

Hutch let that pass. He hung around the saloon long enough to pick up the details of the robbery, which everybody was talking about. For years it had been an open secret that the mining company payroll came in on the midnight stage every Friday night. The day of the road agent had pretty well passed, which was why everyone figured a local citizen had done the job four years ago. And why old Windy Thornton, the driver, had got careless again after Bill Bagley was sent up.

The only difference in circumstances between the two cases, Hutch learned, was that the first time the stage had been held up in the canyon at Three Pines, and this time it happened at Goose Hollow, three-four miles nearer to Round Up. Everything else was patly identical.

WHEN old Hutch rode out of town he pointed his horse in the direction of the Crowbar, not possessing Dex's reluctance to talk about those borrowed boots. He meant to hear what Tony Prendergast had to say about them. As he rode, he cursed Dex for his misguided idea of chivalry.

Yet he was proud of the boy, too. Bill Bagley had won a reputation as a heller, and whisky and cards had kept him from ever amounting to much. If such misfortune can carry good, old Hutch reckoned it had been good for Dex to get a free hand with the Diamond B. He fixed it up as best he could, buying blooded bulls to build up the rundown herd, repairing buildings. He had really wanted to make something out of the place and of himself. But even if they turned him loose, now, old Hutch realized Dex Bagley would likely raise hell higher than old Bill Bagley had ever hoisted it.

Hutch was nearing the Crowbar when sight of a pair of riders crossing the

yellowed flats below him caused him to stop. Presently they were jogging up the road toward him. The old man kept stance in the middle of it until they pulled up. Tony Prendergast wasn't much older than Dex, but shorter and chunkier, with a lean, hawk nose, and jet black hair. He nodded. The girl was equally dark, slender, proud and pretty. She smiled.

"Hello, Mr. Hutchinson."

"All I want to know," Hutch growled, addressing the man, "is what you lost in Digger Creek that day to make you jump in after it!"

Prendergast was astonished. "What do you mean?"

"That I saw you rig it so you could get hold of a pair of Dex Bagley's boots. He ain't told the sheriff that, yet, but I'm going to if you don't come across with a mighty clear explanation!"

It was the girl who made the gunplay so swiftly that Hutch was taken off guard. The small weapon came out of her riding skirt pocket and leveled at Hutch.

"I expect we've got to take him home with us, Tony!"

"You've never been righter!"

It was kind of funny the polite way they handed Hutch around while still keeping the shooting iron lined on him. The old man just didn't understand dudes. They left the road and crossed the flat, coming up to the big ranch house from a swale. Hutch figured this was to keep some of the crew from seeing them.

But once they were inside the richly furnished living room, Tony Prendergast grinned suddenly. "Since thinking it over, Hutch, maybe I'm glad you put your oar in! Look, old-timer! We've got some guests coming for dinner tonight. Maybe it'd be smart to have you join us."

Hutch snorted. "I don't go for fancy grub with a pack of dudes! 'Specially when I got a gun pointed at my gizzard."

The girl smiled. "I'll put it away when we're sure of you."

"You rattled us for a minute out on the road," Prendergast said. "It looked like you were going to bust a carefully laid scheme!"

"You might as well beef me, now, you scheming—"

"Listen, Hutch. You guessed it right about my scheming to get hold of a pair of Dex Bagley's boots. And my sister provoked a quarrel with him yesterday, knowing that would make him get himself drunk. Dex once told me he never can remember what he does when he's lit up. We wanted him accused of holding up the stage and we wanted him locked up, not knowing whether he did or not."

"You got your wish, looks like."

"Yes, if you don't spoil it. It's not what you think, Hutch. If I were going to stick up a stage I certainly wouldn't rely that much on Dex Bagley's feeling for my sister shutting his mouth about my borrowing his boots. Though I reckon it hasn't done his cause with Sis any harm turning out to be that kind of knot-headed idiot! Listen! We want you to help us trap the man who's trying to railroad Dex and who framed his father!"

Old Hutch's jaw hinged open. "Boy, what're you saying?"

"Just what you heard. That man'll be among our guests tonight. I won't tell you who it is, because the stunt'll work better if you don't know. But I'll tell you this. Our plans misfired. We figured the stickup would be pulled at Three Pines just as it was before. We meant to trap this man there, after he had incriminated himself, but before something slipped and somebody on the stage got shot. But he was foxy and pulled it at Goose Hollow. Fortunately old Windy Thornton and his passengers didn't resist, and nobody got hurt. It's up to you, Hutch. If you'll give your word you won't spill the beans and will come over for dinner tonight, we'll let you go home. If not, we'll have to lock you up there until the show's over."

Prendergast looked completely sincere, and the thing was worth seeing through. After a long moment Hutch nodded. "All right. I'll keep my trap shut. I'll be here."

THE afternoon was hotter even than Hutch had anticipated. By evening he was tired and in a fractious mood. He had had no time for society affairs in his long and varied life. That night when he sat down to dinner with most of the Round Up bigwigs it was only a job he had to do. The guests were as surprised as Hutch at his being there.

They included Riley Berg, who ran the biggest mercantile store in town; Tom Chown, the sheriff; Jack Pattee, owner of the Blue Cat Saloon; Chess

Syphers, the druggist; and old Doc Adams. Chown was like Hutch in that he needed only a table knife to get his grub into him, but the others were putting it on real elegant with the fancy dishes and silverware.

Justina Prendergast was a sight for sore eyes in the flowing white gown she had donned for the occasion, though Hutch had not completely put his mind at rest about her. Tony wore a suit of store clothes, like the other townsters. Even Hutch had got out and curried up his best bib-and-tucker.

The meal was nearly finished when Hutch spoke the piece Tony had coached him on, which was easy as he had voiced practically the same thought before.

"Never could figure out, Prendergast, how come you up and jumped in the creek that day. Bet your feet got sore hiking across the flat to Dex Bagley's to borrow some boots."

As before, Tony looked startled, then annoyed. "What creek and what day, Hutch?"

But the ball was rolling, Hutch saw as he let his glance flick around the table. The sheriff was staring at him. Ches Syphers was staring at Pendergast. Enoch Fraling's eyes widened.

"To borry a pair of boots, huh, Tony?" the sheriff grunted.

Tony Prendergast turned angrily toward Hutch. "Look here! What're you trying to imply?"

"Only that an extry pair of Dex Bagley's boots was on the loose the night the stage was stuck up. Or did you return 'em?"

"Yes," Prendergast said eagerly. "Yes, I returned them! Bagley hasn't been coming over this way lately. I've been too busy to take 'em back over to him. So I took 'em in to town the other day and left them at—" He broke off confusedly.

"Left 'em where?" Tom Chown demanded. Old Hutch had to grin to himself. It was evident that the sheriff didn't like having his pat case upset all of a sudden, and it had turned him mean.

It became pretty evident whom this trap was set for. Something came into Riley Berg's eyes that Hutch thought was trapped fear. Then the man's jaw stiffened, and he said:

"I'll answer that. He left them at my store, figuring Bagley'd be in and I could give 'em to him."

"They there now?" Chown asked.

"No. Bagley wasn't in, but one of his neighbors was. I sent them out by him."

"Who was it?"

"Old Hutch."

Hutch looked at him in amazement. "That's a hot one!"

Berg smiled. "It's pretty plain you were trying to cloud up the case against Bagley! But not at my expense, Hutch! Not when you took those boots home to Bagley yourself—or started with them! It couldn't be you wore them to Goose Hollow last night yourself, could it?"

The man's thinking had been too fast for Hutch. The old man shot a quick glance toward Tony Prendergast, who avoided his eyes. Suspicion flared in Hutch like an explosion of giant powder. He had sure played the fool! The trap they'd been talking about had been set for him, all along! They didn't expect to pin the stickup on him; they only wanted to discredit him and neutralize what he knew about the Digger Creek incident. That was how come the Prendergasts had decided to turn him loose that afternoon!

Hutch climbed to his feet, anger shaking him. A bare-faced whopper like that stood as good a show of being believed as any other kind of alibi. It was Prendergast and Berg, he figured. They'd got the others here to witness this. After that fast, bald statement, the old man realized, it would be nigh impossible to make anybody believe anything he said.

So he might as well meet it with a whopper or two himself. He faced the sheriff. "Tom Chown, this morning you made talk about lightning striking twice in the same place. I reckon it will if you bust it to ride and steer it the way you want it to go. I've rid a fork of it a time or two myself. You was so set this morning, trying to ride yours the way you wanted it to go, you never noticed I never really answered your question if I saw Dex Bagley come home last night. I wasn't ready until I knew what the score was. I know now. And the answer is, yes, I did! I not only saw him but he stopped at my house about ten last night and we jawed until two this morning. That's how come I

slept so late! Now how about your two-strike lightnin'?"

The response was electric. The sheriff turned accusing eyes on Riley Berg, who swallowed hard. Then Jack Pattee was speaking, coldly, impatiently, as he always did:

"And you're lying about sending them boots home by Hutch, Berg! One of your clerks was in the Blue Cat early yesterday evening for a drink. He told Bagley that Prendergast had left his boots in the store, and Dex should come over and get 'em. I heard him. You might as well tell the sheriff where you hid the mining company payroll—both this time, and that other."

Riley Berg looked actually sick. "You swear you heard my man tell Dex Bagley where his boots were?"

"I sure do, Mister!"

Tony Prendergast was grinning. "Okay, sheriff. Pattee's your man. Arrest him."

"I—why—now—how come?" Tom Chown blinked his eyes, looking all around.

OLD HUTCH was equally astonished. The sick, trapped look had left Riley Berg's face, and he was grinning as broadly as Prendergast. The girl was quietly smiling. Jack Pattee's eyes had gone deadly cold.

"What is this silly business?" he demanded.

Prendergast's eyes turned chill as he regarded the gambler. "We had to get you to swear to that one fact before witnesses, my friend! Riley Berg has been suspicious of you ever since that little affair four years ago, but he had nothing but suspicion. Principally because you turned unduly prosperous after that first stickup. When Riley found the stain on Dex Bagley's name was clouding Dex's relationship with my sister, he told me about it. We figured what a man has done once successfully he might be stampeded into doing again if suddenly confronted with almost identical conditions."

"What I always claimed!" said Chown, trying to climb back into the saddle from which he had been pitched so suddenly.

"The first time Pattee probably went to the Diamond B to get hold of a pair of Bill Bagley's run-over boots. This time we provided them. We were set to catch him in the act, but he was smart enough to change the scene of the stickup. We were stumped until old Hutch came along. He was one of Dex's true friends. We figured that if we could make him think we were sticking Dex and him by lying we could get him to put up a false alibi for Dex. That, Pattee, was simply to persuade you it was hopeless trying to frame Dex for your crime and to give you a chance to try to stick Riley Berg instead. You fell for it."

The gambler shoved back his chair, obviously shaken, his eyes deadly cold. "A very logical line of hot air, friends! But you've still got to prove it!"

"You proved it, a minute ago. You swore to it that you heard Riley's clerk tell Dex where his boots were. Riley sent that clerk with instructions to see that nobody but you and Dex heard him say that. So you're the one who wrote the note that half-witted Smith kid brought pretty soon asking for the boots. And you're the one who took them when the youngster brought them to the Blue Cat. You used a kid whose testimony wouldn't be worth a hoot!"

"Maybe I did give the kid the note. Maybe the kid did give me the boots. Dex Bagley wrote it. I just didn't want that half-wit coming into the saloon. Dex wasn't in any shape to go after the boots himself!"

"Your turn, Doc!" Riley Berg said to old Doc Adams.

The doctor grinned. "Yeah, Pattee! Wiggle off your right boot! They want me to make an examination so as to have reliable medical testimony in court."

"Why, you!"

"I wouldn't do it, Mr. Pattee!" said Justina Prendergast. Her hand came out of the folds of her skirt bearing the small gun again. The action halted Jack Pattee, whose hand had started toward his armpit. "I'm rather proud of the idea. It was mine, you know. Having the cobbler fix a tack in the heel that you wouldn't notice at first, but that, by the time you got back, would've punctured a hole in your skin!"

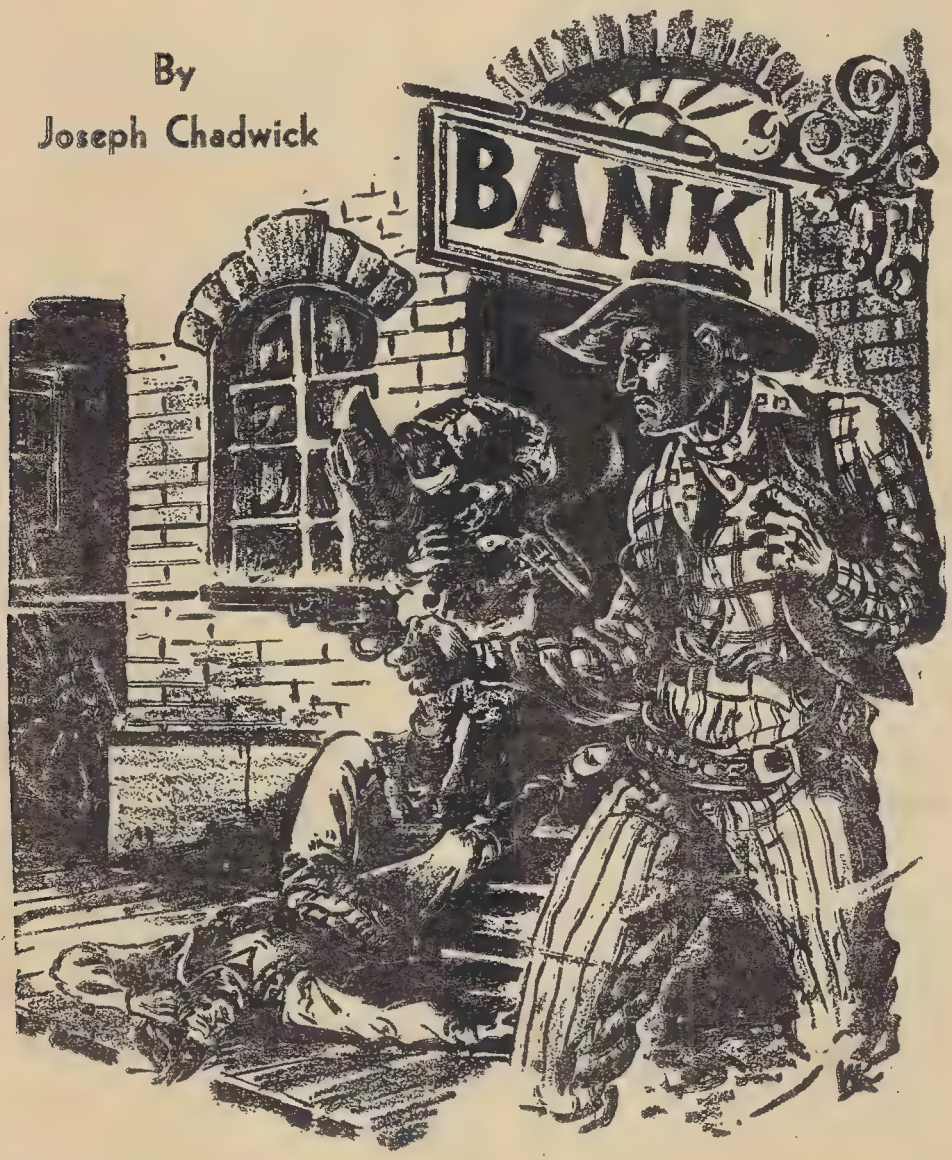
"Come on, Pattee!" Chown growled. "Get that boot off!"

Hutch decided it was time for a weary and cross old man to go home. Not that he was tired of these dudes and bigwigs. Just the heat and the excitement.

(Continued on page 60)

Cut a Notch for Dan

By
Joseph Chadwick



Dan Meager's luck coin told him to ride north to a bank-robbin' payoff. But that ancient cartwheel rang false when Dan found himself being short-changed by a powder-smoke register.

THERE, in the grubby Mexican cantina, with the Druid boys looking on, Dan Meager flipped the coin. He caught it, slapped it down upon the zinc-covered bar. Suddenly reluctant, he did not at once withdraw his hand. Dan's lean young face was frowning, as though he were lost in uneasy thought. The coin

was more than just a coin. It was his last bit of money. It was a silver dollar with a sentimental value—not a good luck charm, but a pocket piece he had become attached to. It was all Dan Meager had inherited from his old man, eight years back.

"Well, what is it? Heads or tails?"

Sam Druid was asking. He had a rough voice, and it fitted him like a glove. There was something hard about Sam Druid, something grindstone hard. There was upon his heavy face the mark of some forgotten brawl, a jagged knife scar across his left cheek. There was a pallor there, too; Sam Druid had just been released from prison.

Pete Druid said, "Yeah; what is it—heads or tails?" Dan shifted his gaze to the kid. Pete was young, maybe ten years younger than Sam or Dan, and there was an excitement in him. Excitement put an unnatural brightness in his dark eyes. It made him appear bolder than he really was. Young Pete Druid was just starting out to ride the danger trail.

The fat Mexican *tabernero*, though it was none of his concern, was watching too—perhaps guessing that here was a man gambling his future, maybe his life, on the mere toss of a coin. Dan Meager shrugged, shook the cobwebby thoughts from his mind, and lifted his hand from the silver dollar.

"Heads," he said. "I'll ride with you hombres."

Sam Druid slapped him on the back, said, "Now you're talking." Young Pete laughed nervously. The Mexican reached for the cartwheel, but Dan quickly took possession of it, saying, "Sam, you pay for the tequila."

Sam paid. They finished their drinks, Pete Druid choking a little on his. They walked from the cantina into the glaring sunlight, and took to their horses. They rode from the squalid Mexican village, headed through the foothills on whose slopes grazed bands of sheep. Their trail headed north, toward the more prosperous cattle country. Sam Druid talked as they rode, seeming to like the sound of his own voice.

"We'll hit this bank on a Saturday morning, because then it's likely to be handling a lot of cash," Sam said. "Pete and me will go inside. You, Dan, will stand outside with the horses. You'll keep an eye open for badge-toters. You see any signs of the Law, you'll take off your hat, hold it in your hands. You savvy?"

Dan nodded. "I savvy, Sam."

"Dan ain't got a gun, Sam," Pete said. "Better give him one."

"Hell, I already gave him a horse!"

"Somebody else's horse," Pete Druid joshed, with a high-pitched laugh. "He'll need a gun, won't he?"

Sam grunted disgustedly, but he brought from his saddle bag a .45 Colt. The weapon was in a holster, and a cartridge belt was wrapped about the holster. He handed it over to Dan Meager, who buckled it about his lean middle. Dan's cheeks were flushed a dull red, for his feelings had been flicked by Sam Druid's jibe at his being so poor he owned neither horse nor six-gun.

"You know how to use a gun, Dan?" Sam demanded, with some scorn.

Dan answered with a jerky nod. He knew how to use a gun, just as he knew how to ride a horse or draw a breath. He suddenly hated Sam Druid and all the man stood for, and he was beginning to hate himself for teaming up with such a no-good.

But he had had no choice. He had been drifting along the border towns, after being laid off when his riding job ended after roundup. He had had the poor judgment to sit in a faro game, and had lost not only his three months' wages but his horse, his saddle and his gun. Then he had met Pete Druid, who was on his way to join up with his brother Sam. Dan had known the Druid brothers when they all were kids.

"We'll split the loot three ways," Sam Druid went on talking. "Me, I get half share. Because I'm the brains behind the job. Pete, you get a quarter part. And you, Dan, get the other quarter part. That suit?"

"Suits me, Sam," said Pete.

"It'll do," Dan Meager said.

"Once we've got the loot, we'll high-tail it out of Blue Bonnet and head north," Sam went on. "I aim to keep going all the way to Dodge, and live high, wide and handsome. Up at Dodge, nobody'll know how we came by our poke. We'll act like three Texas cowpokes come up the trail with money a-jingling in our jeans."

Dan said, "What's at Dodge?"

Sam let loose a bellow of laughter. "What's at Dodge, he says!" He slapped

his thigh and roared with more laughter. "Why, greenhorn, Dodge City has got everything. It's got railroads and stockyards. It's got hotels all prettied up with red and blue plush. It's got honky-tonks where there's girls prettier than anything you ever laid eyes on. And restaurants. Saloons where they sell real champagne. And you can get your picture took right on the street. You can play faro . . ." For once the windy hardcase ran out of words. "Shucks, Dodge has got everything a hombre can think of—and more!"

Pete's young eyes were brighter than ever. "Boy, that's for me! Dodge, here I come! Yippee!"

Dan said, "Just so it's far enough away."

Sam Druid shot him a narrow look. "It's a long way from Blue Bonnet," he said. "Too long a way for the Law to trail us."

IT was a long way even to Blue Bonnet. Dan Meager knew that, even though it was eight years since he had left that cowtown. Now, riding along with the Druid boys, he shut out the sound of Sam's voice and thought back. He had been eighteen when he left Blue Bonnet, a month after his paw had died. Try as he might, he could recall no pleasant memories.

He and his paw and his maw had spent five years at Blue Bonnet, or rather outside the town. They had come from an Ohio farm, because lank Sim Meager had been a man who kept wondering what lay beyond the horizon. Paw Meager had been a man constantly in search of greener pastures. But he had not found them in the Blue Bonnet country.

It was cow country, and cowmen were a breed jealous of their range and their water. They hated farmers, whom they called sodbusters and nesters—and worse. The Meager family had had trouble with the ranchers right from the start, first over an irrigation dam Sim Meager had built, and later over a slaughtered beef.

Maw Meager had worried; to a woman in poor health, worry could in time be fatal. Dan's mother had died before the farm was lost. Dan was fifteen, then, and that was the winter he quit school.

He had liked school and book learning well enough, but most of the pupils at the Blue Bonnet school were from ranch families or from the town families. They had not taken kindly to a nester kid, and their constant jibes had been the cause of Dan's leaving school. He had been proud; he hadn't liked being treated like dirt. There were other things, too, during the following three years. But the most important had been Sim Meager's death.

Sim had lost the farm by then, and, like young Dan, he hired out by the day—wherever he could get work. He had begun to drink, and to keep bad company. He got mixed up with Luke Druid, Sam's and Pete's no-good old man, and some horses were stolen. Some ranchers gave chase, and there had been some shooting. Luke Druid was killed outright, Sim Meager was wounded. Sim died two days later.

Now, riding back to Blue Bonnet, Dan Meager was grown to manhood. He had left Blue Bonnet embittered, but determined to amount to something. He was still bitter in his mind and in his heart, and he had not amounted to anything. Dan took the silver dollar from his pocket. An inheritance! One silver dollar. It was tarnished almost black. But there was bright silver—and brighter gold—in the Blue Bonnet bank. Old Sim Meager had died a moment after giving his eighteen-year-old son grim advice.

"Stay decent, son—keep honest, even if you're as poor as a church mouse. You promise, Danny—you promise?"

Young Dan had promised, that being the decent thing to do.

But eight years had dimmed the high resolve of that promise. Dan Meager pocketed his silver dollar.

THE next day they kept to the back trails and at sundown reached Peso Wells, three miles south of the town of Blue Bonnet. There was a stand of cottonwoods and a clear water stream. Nearby were the ruins of an old stage station, its crumbling walls charred and smoke-blackened by a long-ago fire.

"Injun raid here some years back," Sam Druid said. "Some folks were massacred right inside those walls. Good place to hole up tonight. Nobody ever comes here." He spoke in an odd, hushed voice. Pete Druid looked uneasily about. It was as though the two brothers half believed the hand of death still lay upon Peso Wells.

They dismounted, unsaddled their mounts, and Dan built up a fire. Pete Druid brought grub from his saddle bag and, when the fire was crackling, rustled up a meal of beans, bacon and coffee. The three of them hunkered down by the fire, the Druid boys eating wolfishly, but Dan Meager had no appetite at all. The food seemed to stick in Dan's throat.

"You ain't eating, Dan," said Pete.

"Yeah. What's wrong with you, hombre?" Sam Druid said, eying Dan narrowly. "You don't talk, you don't eat. You scared of something?"

"Just not hungry," Dan said, and, putting aside his grub, rolled a smoke. He took a bit of burning brush from the fire and puffed his quirly alight. He felt Sam Druid's hard gaze upon him.

"Trouble with you," Sam muttered, "is that you don't hate that town enough. It kicked you and your pappy around, just like it did us Druids, but you ain't got the guts to hate it. Yeah, I know! You half forget that your old man was robbed and murdered by Blue Bonnet. Or maybe you're thinking of that Brant girl you were sweet on—"

Dan said, "Sam, you talk too much."

"Me, I'll talk all I want," Sam said, and now he was in an ugly temper. "Maybe you think that Martha Brant is still waiting for you. Well, you're wrong! She married Cliff Harlan, whose old man owns the bank we're going to stick up." He gave Dan a mocking grin. "Maybe that will put some guts into you, hombre."

Dan did not answer that. The meal was done, and the fire had burned down to a bed of red-glowing embers. With the sun down, a purplish haze blanketed the desert. Sam and Pete Druid talked in low voices until full dark, then Sam, suddenly restless, went to catch up and saddle his horse.

"This place gives me the creeps," he said. "I'm riding into town for a couple of hours. You boys get some shut-eye. Me, I'll be back when you see me."

He rode out, and Dan said, "Pete, what's he up to?"

"Needs a drink, maybe. Or maybe he hankers to see a woman. Sam is sure some bucko."

Dan grunted, then rose and spread out his bedroll. Young Pete could worship his no-good brother, but Dan Meager was ready to believe that Sam Druid had been born to hang.

Pete stretched out for the night. Through the darkness, he talked to Dan Meager. Pete said, "Don't you be scared, Dan. Holding up a bank ain't much of a chore. Sam and I will walk in tomorrow morning, and the bank teller will say, 'Good morning, gents. What can I do for you?' And Sam will show his six-gun, saying, 'Friend, this is my passbook. I aim to draw out some money!'"

Dan grunted again at the edgy sound of the kid's laughter. He lay with his arms folded under his head, staring up at the dark sky, and his thoughts drifted. He wished Sam Druid hadn't mentioned Martha Brant; the girl was one of the things—one of the unpleasant memories—of Blue Bonnet that Dan had tried to forget. Martha Brant had attended the same school that had treated the towheaded young Dan Meager as a pariah. Martha was a rancher's daughter, but she had never called Dan a nester kid.

Later, long after Dan quit school, when Dan was eighteen and Martha seventeen, they had met again and had ridden horseback together, stirrup to stirrup, finding each other good company. . . . There was to be a dance in Blue Bonnet, in the town hall, and Dan asked to take Martha. She had said, "I'd rather go with you, Dan, than anybody else."

"Better even than Cliff Harlan?" he had asked, with some jealousy.

Martha had shyly dropped her gaze, but she had nodded. The night of the dance, Dan had hired a buggy and driven out to the Brant ranch. But he did not get to see Martha. Purd Brant, her father, had come out to the buggy, saying, "Meager, I want no trouble with you. But I won't have my daughter gallivanting around with such as you. Turn your rig and drive out of here. You savvy?"

"What's wrong with me?" Dan had said.

"You know blamed well, kid. Your old man was a nester, and now he's a no-account bum—and a horse thief, as well, I'm thinking. Like father, like son. Drive out of here, pronto!"

Dan had wanted to go at Purd Brant with his fists, but he realized that was no good. He had driven away. Later he had learned that Cliff Harlan, the banker's son, had taken Martha to that dance. . . .

Hate the town of Blue Bonnet? Dan Meager lay looking up at the stars and knew that he did hate everything about

that smug town. It had caused his mother's death; it had robbed his father of his livelihood, and finally killed him. It had given him, Dan Meager, no chance at all. Because that town had been against him, his life had been an empty thing—like a book with nothing printed upon its pages.

But he could make it pay him something. Sam Druid had said they would get at least ten thousand dollars from the Blue Bonnet bank. Dan told himself he would go through with it, that he would not back out, yet try as he would he could not sleep on that resolve. The night dragged endlessly.

Sam Druid did not get back to the camp until the pink of dawn was in the eastern sky. He rode in looking bad, his heavy face puffed and his eyes bloodshot, a man getting over a drunk. He roused Pete Druid and Dan Meager with a bellowed shout. "Build up a fire and make me some coffee," he ordered.

Dan started the fire, the kid Pete put on the coffee, and then Sam drank down the brew hot and black. He began to feel better by the time the sun was up, and began giving orders as to how they were to pull the bank job. "A hombre I know in town told me that bank will be a pushover. He says there hasn't been a holdup in Blue Bonnet in two, three years. Nobody'll be expecting the Harlan bank to be held up. We'll start out soon, so as to hit town a little after bank-opening time—nine o'clock."

"We riding in together, Sam?" Dan asked.

"No. That'd look too suspicious. We'll ride in separate," said Sam Druid. "Since you're to watch for the Law, Dan, you ride in first. You can wait by Pop Granby's drug store, across from the bank. If you see anything suspicious, you signal me. If it looks like real trouble, we'll wait for another day. You signal trouble by taking off your hat. You savvy?"

"I savvy," Dan said, and went to saddle up his horse.

BLUE BONNET had grown and it had changed a lot. There were more stores and shops. Many of the ugly falsefronts had been replaced by fine brick buildings. The Harlan family bank, called the Cattlemen's Trust Company, was a new brick building. Since it was a Saturday morning, the main street was bustling with people and wagons and horses. Dan rode in and dismounted before the drug store; his heart was pounding crazily, with excitement and fear, and his nerves felt knotted tight. It was exactly nine o'clock by the timepiece in the drug store window.

Someone within the bank ran up the window shade and opened the wide front door, and a couple of men went inside on business. A man and a woman, with a small boy walking between them, came along the opposite side of the street. The three halted before the bank, the man smiling and saying good-by to his wife and son. It was Cliff Harlan and Martha Brant, who was now his wife, and their child.

Dan stared, envy in him. Then he gave a guilty start as someone came from the drug store, halted by him, and said, "Why, Dan—*Dan Meager!*"

Swinging around, Dan faced a girl whose face was lighted up with pleasure. She had no striking beauty like the woman across the street, yet she was a pretty girl. She was not fashionably dressed as Martha Harlan, but she could give charm to the mannish riding clothes she wore. Boots and levis, a flannel shirt and a sombrero hanging at her shoulders by its chin cord. Freckles across the bridge of her pug nose. A laughing voice saying, "Don't you remember me, Dan?"

"Bonnie Vance," Dan said, remembering. Her folks had been nesters, too; they had farmed a quarter section next to the Meager family. When Dan had been eighteen, Bonnie had been fourteen. He remembered something more about Bonnie Vance. She once had told him, when he had joshed her about her freckles and her pigtails, that, "Laugh at me, if you like, Dan Meager, but I'll be your friend when a certain fine lady gets tired of you and puts you in your place!"

Dan removed his hat, smiled and said, "Bonnie, you've done it—you've grown up. You grew up pretty." He looked down at her left hand. "No wedding ring?"

Bonnie looked squarely at him. "Now who would I marry, Dan?" She was half joking, but half serious too. "When I gave my heart to you, when I wore pigtails. Now that you're back, are you looking for a job? A riding job with a future, Dan?" She now was very much in earnest.

"Dad and the boys and I are ranching

now. Oh, it's still a two-bit outfit but we'll grow. We've been thinking of hiring a hand or two."

"Got a job," Dan said, hating to lie to anyone as nice as Bonnie Vance—but hating more to have her know what he really was. "A good job on a spread up in the Colorado bottoms."

His gaze evaded Bonnie's steady, probing eyes. He looked across the street; Cliff Harlan had entered the bank, but Martha and her small son were walking slowly along the board sidewalk. Bonnie glanced that way, too, and she frowned.

"So you haven't forgotten Martha Brant—Martha Harlan, now?" she said, an edge to her voice. "Too bad—for you, Dan. But she isn't like you must have remembered her. She's plump now, almost fat."

Dan might have been amused by Bonnie's cattiness, but at that moment Sam Druid came riding into town. Sam came on, and he gave Dan a scowling look, and kept on going—past the bank. Only then did Dan realize that he had removed his hat and still held it in his hand—not as a signal, but out of respect for Bonnie Vance.

Now Pete Druid came riding in from a side street. The kid, too, saw that Dan had his hat in his hand, and he swung north along Main Street—following Sam, away from the bank.

When Dan realized what had happened, he felt as though a great weight had been lifted from him. He knew then what he should have known all along, that he did not want any part in a bank holdup.

Bonnie said, "Wasn't that Sam Druid riding by? Isn't that Pete Druid? What are they doing here?"

Dan said, "Bonnie, thanks for the offer of a job. I've got to hit the trail." He donned his hat, took up his mount's reins, swung to the saddle. He looked down at Bonnie Vance, liking the pretty picture she made and realizing that she possessed all the fine qualities he once had seen in Martha Brant. "It's been nice seeing you. Adios."

Bonnie did not answer. She was staring frowningly at her booted feet as he rode away.

DAN caught up with the Druid boys just outside of town. They had reined in before a ramshackled old barn, and they were talking to a swarthy-skinned man who looked like a hardcase. Sam Druid's heavy face was black with rage, and he said, "What's the idea, hombre, signaling trouble? Ike Gault here tells us the town marshal is out of town!"

"A mistake, Sam," Dan said, dismounting. "I took off my hat to talk to a lady, forgetting about the signal. But I've changed my mind, friend, I am not helping you rob that bank. Maybe I'm yellow, but I've got no heart for breaking the law. Maybe this town did kick me around like a homeless cur, but I'm not holding any grudges. You better forget this gun game, Sam, and clear out of Blue Bonnet."

"That Vance girl sweet-talked you!"

"Maybe, and maybe not," Dan said. "But after talking with her, I savvied some things I never knew before. The Vance family has licked this town honestly, and if they can do it—"

He got no farther. Sam Druid muttered an oath, jerked out his six-gun and slammed it down upon Dan's head. Dan staggered, half blinded with pain; his hat fell off, and the six-gun struck him again and again. His knees buckled and he slumped down, not unconscious but limp from the terrible pain. He was only dimly aware that Sam Druid ordered Pete and Ike Gault to pick him up and carry him into the barn—that he was so carried, dumped into an empty stall, and left alone.

There was a great throbbing pain in Dan Meager's head. When he picked himself up, he staggered like a drunken man. His stomach upheaved and for a few minutes he was violently sick. He stumbled out into the sunlight, made his way to a pump outside the building. He pumped a stream of water, doused his head under it. The coldness of the gushing water eased some of his pain. He wiped his face on his shirt sleeve, squeezed the moisture from his hair, then looked about for his hat. He found the hat, but the horse he had ridden was gone.

He walked, still unsteadily, toward the town road. A ranch wagon was coming along at a fast clip. He swung up over the tailgate when the rancher nodded to his question, "Haul me in to town?"

The wagon rolled into Blue Bonnet, along Main Street. A block from the bank Dan dropped from it and went on afoot. He began to run, at a lurching gait, for he saw the Druid boys' three horses

standing before the bank—and the hard-cased Ike Gault lounging beside them. He saw something more, something that chilled him with alarm. Martha Harlan and her son were close to the bank's doorway; they were going to enter it.

Sam Druid had not taken back the gun he had given Dan Meager, and it was that gun that was Sam's undoing. Dan heard a shot roar within the bank. He heard someone scream. He saw Martha Harlan pick up her son and shrink back as the two Druids came backing from the building.

Sam and the kid were firing as they retreated, shooting wildly into the bank. Pete was carrying a heavy saddle bag—the loot, of course. But their shooting was senseless. Sam was shooting because killing was a part of his nature. The kid was triggering his gun, perhaps out of nervousness. People along the street were screaming, running one way and then another in panic.

Dan drew his six-gun as he alone ran toward the holdup trio. He shouted, "Sam—Pete, drop those guns!"

Sam whirled with a bellowed curse and quickly fired. Dan heard the vicious whine of the bullet, close to his head. Dan had the wild thought, *If he shoots again, he'll hit Martha Harlan!* Sam Druid was acting like a crazy man. Dan did not want to kill him, but all that he could see was the danger to that woman and her child. Martha Harlan was stumbling into the street, running away from the gunfire, yet plunging right into the line of Sam Druid's shooting.

Dan had once told Sam Druid that he could use a six-gun. He used one now, more accurately than ever before. His shot struck the outlaw in the chest, drove Sam Druid back a step, then spilled him over backwards.

Ike Gault had drawn his gun, but Dan fired at him—missing, but making the hardcase drop his weapon and throw up his arms. Dan, still running forward, had passed Martha Harlan and was nearly on top of young Pete Druid. There was a shocked, horrified look on the kid's face.

"Pete," Dan said, "don't make me kill you!"

There was some sense in the kid. He dropped his gun and then the loot-filled saddle bag. He looked as though he would break into tears.

Cliff Harlan and a teller came running from the bank. People came from every direction, from every house and store and shop, now that the danger was over. Cliff Harlan retrieved the bank money, and some men seized Ike Gault and the frightened Pete Druid to take them to the town lockup. The town medico came with his black bag to look at the wounded Sam Druid. Dan Meager backed away from the excited throng, wanting to get away. He was beginning to feel unsettled in his stomach again.

SOME of the crowd shouted after Dan, but he kept on walking. He stepped up onto the board sidewalk on the west side of the street. From the doorway of a restaurant, the Welcome Café, Bonnie Vance said, "Dan, come in here. The crowd will be after you in a minute, you being a hero. Come in, Dan."

Bonnie's hand on his arm drew him inside. She had been sitting at the counter eating a midmorning lunch when the trouble broke out. Dan took the stool next to hers, and the fat counterman, who seemed wholly uninterested in gunplay, said, "What'll it be?"

Dan said he'd have a cup of coffee. He drank it down slowly, hot and black. It settled his stomach, took the knots out of his nerves. Beside him, Bonnie, showing her excitement only in the brightness of her eyes, finished her meal. There was still excitement down the street, but no one came to the café hunting the man who had stopped the bank robbers. Finally the counterman said:

"That'll be fifty-five cents, folks."

Bonnie reached into the pocket of her levis, but Dan said, before he thought, "The treat is on me, Bonnie." Too late he remembered how flat broke he was. Frowning, he brought out the silver dollar—the inheritance that he had carried about with him for so many years. He slid the cartwheel across the counter.

The fat counterman picked it up, stared at it suspiciously. He dropped it onto the counter, listening for its ring. The coin gave off only a dull flat sound. "Friend," he said, "this thing is no good. Sorry, but it's a counterfeit."

Dan Meager had never before felt so cheap. He recalled how he had boasted about that good job. But Bonnie Vance, if she remembered that boast, merely said, "Oh, let it be on me this time, Dan."

(Continued on page 68)

Three-Shot Handicap

By Roy Stallings

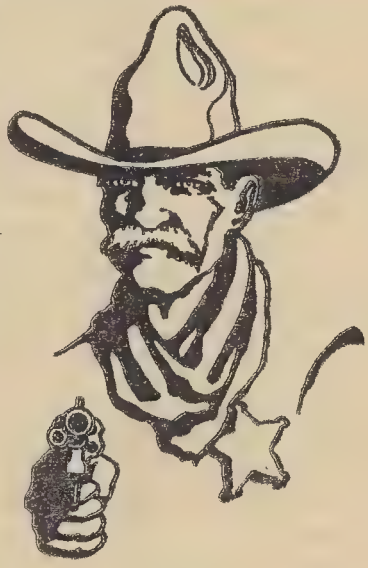
Maybe the outlaw, Rye Wilson, knew the old saying, "Some men are born big and some small, but a Smith & Wesson makes 'em all equal." But Wilson didn't know the sheriff's Smith & Wesson as well as that trigger-wise lawdog did.

HE SAT erect in the saddle, his dark eyes gleaming disdainfully at the posse of men tying their mounts to the hitching rail. For a man with a noose about his neck he was arrogant. There was no humiliation or surrender in the tilt of the heavy chin or the squareness of the thick shoulders. Only contempt for the posse and the slender, blond-haired deputy holding the gun. His own weapon was gone. The cartridge belt and the empty holster sagging from the thigh seemed alien and useless.

"This is home, Rye," Deputy Jack Hall said, grinning. He jerked the gun several times toward the jail. "You won't escape again. Come on, let's go in."

Rye Wilson flicked an eye at the weather-beaten building. Then he hooked his bonded wrists over the saddle pommel and swung his two hundred pounds of outlaw flesh to the street. The noose carelessly flung about his neck trailed him toward the jail.

Observing all this through his office window, old Dan Todd wasn't quite certain it was good or bad. Good for the community, but bad for him. The silver star on the front of his cotton shirt caught the evening sun and threw a splash of gold on the office wall. This was his shield of honor. For a quarter of a century it had led this tall, blue-eyed man where the forces of law and order were in demand. His record was faultless, legendary. But now back from a long prison term was Rye Wilson, an old enemy convicted a decade and a half ago. He had returned for vengeance.



Rye was in Willow Bend only a week before Matty McGrew was found shot to death in his bank. Todd brought Rye in two days later. Some of the stolen money was still on him. Then last night he sawed his way out of the cell window. Todd had a premonition Rye was planning to bring disgrace upon him.

Judge Elmer Pierce, Jim Smith, rancher, Eddie Knox, merchant, all prominent citizens of Willow Bend, rose as one and came to stand behind the sheriff. They, too, looked at the outlaw.

"He's a killer," Judge Pierce observed. "That's why we are here, Dan. We know a man grows old in any profession. We think it would be better for you to turn this job over to a younger man. Then you could show more interest in your Circle-8 ranch. You aren't as capable as you use to be. The enforcement of the

law ought to be handled by a man—"

"Hell and high water!" the sheriff swore, spinning to face the committee. "Out there is a man who swore to ruin me. He escaped last night so you good citizens would be on my neck for negligence. I'm sticking to this job till Rye Wilson is strung. I don't care if he escapes every day. That's my answer!"

The committee of three stared with blank amazement at the gray-headed lawman. Then they turned toward the door.

The tall outlaw kicked his way into the office and strode to the nearest cell. He slammed the iron door behind him and thrust his wrists between the bars. Jack slashed the cords with a pen knife. Wilson then removed the rope from around his neck and tossed it to the deputy.

"Where was he hidin'?" Dan asked. Still burning with rage, he took the key-ring from a peg on the wall and locked the iron door that held the outlaw. "We'll search you from head to toe in a minute, Rye. This time you ain't gettin' out."

The deputy carefully placed the outlaw's gun on the desk. "We found him at the Circle-8."

Judge Elmer Pierce caught his breath. "What was he doing there?"

Glances were suddenly exchanged in the room. Old Dan felt his neck beginning to redden. This is how Rye wanted it. Word would soon get around that he had slipped the outlaw the saw. He faced young Hall.

"Who told you to search my ranch?"

"Nobody. We found Rye's trail. It led right to your place. Hell, he was cookin' dinner when we got there."

A silence engulfed the little office. A silence that could be felt, like trail dust. Only the scraping of Dan's heels as he shuffled to his desk broke upon it. The chair groaned audibly as he eased downward. Judge Pierce finally spoke.

"I hope you had nothing to do with that jailbreak," he said. His eyes behind the thick glasses were ominous, doubtful. Dan read public opinion there. "Come on, men, we've other business to do."

They filed out of the room, leaving Jack Hall and Dan alone with the prisoner.

"RYE WILSON," Dan said softly, "take off all your clothes and toss them to me. Jack, you run out and eat. Hurry back."

He went through the clothes cautiously, while the outlaw sat nude on the cot. No article small or large was concealed in the garments. This time no bars would be cut.

"I've waited fifteen years for this moment," Rye growled, slipping into his pants. "First I'm going to have you run out of town in disgrace. Then I'm going to fill that old hide full of holes."

Todd sat relaxed in the chair. The outlaw's gun hung by the trigger guard on his finger. He twirled it expertly, feeling the weight of the heavy Colt.

"You shouldn't robbed Matty McGrew. Killing that old buzzard will get you the rope. Even if he did need it."

"Maybe. But I thought this all out first. That's why I was at your ranch. I was foolin' around your books, Dan. When I come to trial people are goin' to learn you hired me to shoot Matty. He held the mortgage on the Circle-8, didn't he?"

"You are a clever coyote," Dan muttered. "Too clever. But you always make a mistake, Rye." He opened a drawer and slid the gun inside, closed and locked it.

"Fifteen years ago you was pretty smart," Rye reflected. "Along with that was the fastest gun arm I ever saw. But you've slowed down. You're old. All you got is your damned reputation, and I intend to take care of that. Now go out and get me some supper."

"Maybe I've slowed down," Dan replied. "Maybe I'm just a lot wiser."

Willow Bend lay bathed in the mystical beauty of a moonlit night. Shadows reeled across the dusty street, lurching from swinging door to swinging door, reveling in the lusty life of the frontier. Shouts were heard, laughter, the stomping of feet to the tune of a fiddle. A cool breeze swept over the serrated peaks and fanned the burning cheeks of the celebrants.

Seated at his desk Dan Todd felt it too. So did young Hall where he sat with his chair tilted against the wall. Rye Wilson felt nothing. He seemed to be sleeping.

"Wish this hombre hadn't come around," Jack was saying. "He's stirring up all kinds of trouble. We could of strung him up today."

"That's not justice."

"But there's talk goin' around. People

are whispering you two might be up to something. I don't like it."

"Thanks," the sheriff mumbled. The golden glow from the overhead lamp caught the prominent features of the lawman's face, the thin, hooked nose, the high cheekbones, the lean, pointed chin. Jack saw no weakness there, only courage and determination.

"Dan, I'd rather work with you than own this whole damned town. I know there's nothin' in that talk. I'd like to be half the lawman you are. Dad used to tell me stories about you. You was his best friend. You've practically raised me since the rustlers got him."

"Sure, sure, I know, Jack." Something inside him turned over. He was never certain when he looked at that face whether it reminded him of a man or a woman. He looked like his dad and his mother. Dan had loved both.

The door suddenly opened. A little man stood there. His face was red from running.

"Hell is poppin' in Judge Pierce's Golden Bar," he panted. "Better come, sheriff."

"This is a job for me," Jack Hall cried, springing to his feet. Before Dan could interrupt he looked to his gun and went running behind the little man into the street.

SO THEY were already talking? The evil seed of doubt had been sown. A man had come out of the past, living on the fruit of vengeance. Already his designs were shaping in the hearts of the little people of Willow Bend. They were quick to believe and quick to forget. A man gains little by serving the public. Here was Jack, rushing to do his duty, risking his young life, only to have the incident forgotten long before the little swamper sweeps the last cigar butt into the street come morning.

His reputation was at stake. This man sprawled there in the cell would not have his plans fulfilled. The committee of three would return to him someday and apologize. Dan Todd was not too old to fight.

He was still dreaming when the door opened. Judge Pierce stood there, frowning behind his heavy-rimmed glasses.

"Sheriff Todd," he said with difficulty, "there's trouble in my saloon."

"Can't Jack handle it?"

"No! That young fool is nothing but a laughing stock. These men are drunk. It takes a man with a head on his shoulders to handle them."

"Thanks, Judge. But somebody's got to look after this prisoner. Could you do it?"

"Don't take me for a fool," Pierce growled. "Of course I can. You get down to my saloon."

The Golden Bar wasn't a pretty place. Two trigger-happy cowboys had struck it with the fury of an avalanche. Tables were overturned, playing cards, bottles and broken glass made a scattered debris about the floor.

Jack Hall wasn't hurt. He occupied the seat of honor in the center of the room. He was sitting there straight like an Apache, his pale lips trembling with rage. The two cowboys had him amply covered with their guns. The bright star he was so proud to wear was stuck in the bar, and both wobbling men were using it for a target. They were taking turns firing as Dan eased himself unnoticed into the saloon.

Suddenly the sheriff drew his gun and squeezed the trigger. The badge disappeared as the slug smashed into it. The cowboys turned to stare into each other's eyes. When they saw old Dan they tried to smile. Their smoking guns fell with a double thump to the floor. That was all. The slender, gray-headed sheriff was in control of the incident.

"Naturally you boys will pay for this damage." Old Dan smiled. The two men silently nodded. Jack, released from his bondage, went in search of his discarded weapon.

When they met at the door Jack was trying to straighten the badge. "You wrecked it," he said. "There's another one around the office, but I'm going to keep this one for a souvenir. Maybe someday I'll savvy drunken cowhands."

They strode slowly along the sidewalk. The breeze was still warm on the cheek. Somewhere a girl was laughing.

"I left Pierce at the jail."

"Well, guess he's got no confidence in me now," Jack said regretfully.

"I don't know. The judge is all right. He's interested in this town, wants to see it grow. Fellows like us have to be on their toes or he's gonna see we ain't around long. You've got a future here, Jack. I ain't."

"Don't try to fool me," Jack replied.

"You like it here too. Nothin' would please you more than to convince Judge Pierce you're still man enough to run this sheriffin' business."

"You're right. But I'm not as young as I use to be."

OLD DAN was the first to enter the office. He took two steps inside and stopped. The scene that met his eyes left his heart pounding. Rye Wilson stood by the desk, a revolver in his hand. He was grinning.

"Come in, you two," he said. "Join the judge. I'm on my way out."

In the cell formerly occupied by the outlaw lay Judge Pierce. A stain of red was dyeing the white hair around his left temple. Reading the sheriff's mind the outlaw laughed.

"Just a bang on the skull. He'll live to be a wiser judge. Next time he won't unlock a cell when a prisoner has a pain." He waved the gun to keep the two men covered. "You know, Dan, I've changed my plans some. Think I'll just put those holes in your hide now. Save me a lot of time and trouble."

Sheriff Todd never moved. His arms hung at his side. Little crow's feet appeared around the corners of his eyes.

"I see you couldn't get your Colt," he said.

"No. But you are going to toss me the keys to the desk. Then I'll be leaving. But first unbuckle your gunbelt and drop the hardware to the floor."

A pair of hero-worshiping eyes watched the gnarled right hand move toward the belt buckle. This would be the end of old Dan's legendary career. The man who had loved and avenged his father was whipped. When the belt slipped from his waist a great career would be done. Rye Wilson smiled in triumph. He held the winning card. This wasn't a badge stuck on a bar, or a pair of drunken cowboys. The chips were in in this game. This was a killer with a gun.

But Dan Todd did a surprising thing. Instead of the buckle he defied the odds and reached for his gun. It was a swift gesture against a stacked hand. The hero-worshiping eyes thought this was a proud man's way to commit suicide, a futile attempt at last minute glory.

The barrel cleared the holster and swept upward toward the heart of the outlaw. The gun in Rye's hand clicked twice as the hammer fell on lifeless chambers. Then the gun in the sheriff's hand spoke with a thunderous voice. Rye Wilson fell backward on the desk, slipped to the floor.

"Guess I still know a thing or two," Todd reflected, kicking the fallen gun aside. "Call the doc, Jack, we got to look after the judge."

In half an hour Judge Pierce was on his feet, his head wrapped in bandages. Rye Wilson was carried away. The story of the break circulated about Willow Bend, and many citizens had come to look at the fabulous Dan Todd. But the sheriff kept the jail clear.

"I owe you an apology," Pierce said, offering his hand to Dan. "Don't know what got into us, thinking the things we did. It was all wrong. You're the best darned sheriff in the West. I'll lick the fellow who says otherwise." Grinning, they wrung hands.

"Glad you think so, Judge," Dan said modestly. "It was simple. When I saw you I knew what had happened. Anyone could fall for one of Rye's tricks. Then I saw he wasn't using your gun. It was on the floor. Rye broke your gun trying to get his Colt, which I had locked up. The gun he was using is my extra Smith & Wesson I never carry. It hung on the wall, empty. Rye got it and was loading up when we come in. I knew that 'cause three cartridges were on the desk. I could only see three in the cylinder of the gun."

The judge grinned. "With three bullets in the gun, Rye didn't have a chance. You only had to beat him to the draw."

"Rye always used a Colt while I carry a Smith & Wesson," Dan continued. "These guns feed opposite, one cylinder turning to the left, the other turning to the right. Rye put the shells in the wrong side of the chamber. I had a couple of clicks on him before he could fire."

Judge Elmer Pierce stepped into the street. He glanced up at the stars. Somehow, he knew Willow Bend was in capable hands.

Gunhawks at Finley's Perch

Action-Packed Novelette

By Giff Cheshire

Gabe Eberly, mule skinner extraordinary, hauled himself into plenty of trouble when he took that flight into Finley's Perch. For gun buzzards had swooped there before Gabe to mark him for Colt carrion.

I

EBERLY met the wagon train on the long Tandem Creek grade, directly after he had splashed the pack string through the ford at the foot, and he threw the tired animals onto a turnout to let the big freight outfit rumble past. The heavy rigs were all loaded, lashed and canvas covered, and the high wheels careened in the deep ruts, screeching against the brake blocks, boiling the yellow dust into a long, twisting cloud that trailed behind.

A big, hard-mouthed man with a hook nose rode up on a buckskin horse, the mount twisting its neck and dancing, its jaw open under the brutal tug of the bit. Gabe Eberly's lips tightened, a current of annoyance flowing over him. The man's big nose might as well have had his name printed on it. This would be Buck Tabor, Linus Herrell's tough wagon boss.

"Packer!" Tabor barked. "Linus Herrell tends to all the hauling hereabouts. He runs plenty of freight wagons and stages, and there just ain't no need in these parts for you. So you better turn your string around and head back where you come from!"

Gabe turned bland eyes on Tabor. His lips parted, and after a thoughtful moment he said, mildly and courteously: "This Freedom town's the rail point hereabouts, ain't it?" His voice was a slow, almost weary drawl. "That's where a man's got to go to get a haul."

He was tall and stringy, stropped thin by incalculable trail miles, and all kinds of weather had burned and leathered his angular face. Politeness came natural to him, sometimes concealing the fact that within him there was little fear. It had fooled the wagon master.

"Get turned around and shagging, packer!" Tabor growled. "We'll eat your dust awhile to make you keep traveling!"

"This Linus Herrell don't run his out-

fits to places where I kin put my string, does he?" Gabe asked, slowly and with the merest edge of warning. "Then it don't seem to me there's any argument." Hipping around, he whistled sharply. The lead mule twitched its ears and plodded off. Gabe did not look at the wagon master again as he followed with the starting pack string.

Gabe was a little surprised that they made no move to change his mind for him, but he was aware presently that the wagon train was rolling on. He appeared to have put uncertainty into Buck Tabor, who seemed unused to having his bull voice and hard eyes defied. The solemn-faced packer was not displeased with the outcome.

Mule skinner extraordinary was Gabe Eberly. A tramp-stringer, he went where the hauls summoned, and they had wooed him to many places. This Freedom, for which he was heading, was rail point for a new mining territory opened in the rugged and formidable Maverick Mountains. He had heard about it in a town down the line where he had provisioned a few days before.

"Finley's Perch is the dangdest layout you ever seen!" a man had said. "This old Finley prospected up there for years before he made his big strike. The town's where he used to have his shack. Some big mines around there, now—Blue Star and Emmaline and Yellow Tip and some smaller ones. They're all strung out around Finley's Perch. But if you're thinking about heading that way, you'll likely have trouble with Linus Herrell and his tough wagon boss, Buck Tabor.

"They've run out many another ahead of you. They've been freighting around Freedom a long time and running stages. Finley's Perch has been a real gold mine to Herrell. He does all its hauling—freight and passengers. You better go somewhere else, unless you like a scrap!"

AND now Gabe Eberly was pointed toward Freedom, having come through a cut-off that ran close but did not touch Finley's Perch. It had taught him something about the country and planted a rising excitement in him.

"Dagnab me if I can't give this Herrell a run for his money! Must be a good sixty miles between Freedom and Finley's Perch, by the wagon road. Was a man to go through that Devil's Divide, it wouldn't be over thirty. Rigs can't go through the divide. Mules kin."

Mules could, but not without sweating for it, he had reconsidered as he scouted out the possibility. Years of tramp packing had never shown him country like this. It was scrubby terrain, mostly rock, so badly broken it seemed a giant's hammer had pounded it to pieces, back in the beginning of time. Everywhere distance ran fractured and awesome to the cloud-hung horizons. Yet there were slants and canyons a mule string could follow under a good driver.

The air had a clean, vigorous smell to it, while in the early afternoon sun gorgeous colors ran as from a prism over the choppy miles. The mingling challenge and promise of it set a powerful attraction on the vista before Gabe Eberly.

Gabe pulled into Freedom in late afternoon and left the pack string with a rancher on the edge of town. The horizon was still molten with heat, even at the late hour, yet it was dissolving slowly, with a small breeze beginning to lap from the northward heights. Light glinted up from the rails as he rode across the tracks, close by the depot, and jogged down the one broad and deeply dusted street. Sound and scent drifted to him, those from a near-by saloon setting up pleasant animations in his parched throat.

Then he saw a small figure, standing alone and desolate against the false-front wall of the harness shop. There were a few things that quickly reached Gabe Eberly; such as squawling kittens, helpless youngsters, or young women sobbing softly and shamed.

Gabe halted his pony, his arms slacked flat against his sides, his head bobbing sideways. "Ma'am, I bet it ain't so bad it can't be fixed."

The girl whirled toward him, blinking back tears. She didn't answer but flung herself around in angry embarrassment and started to march down the street. Then she paused, turning back hesitantly.

She had a finely chiseled face, he observed, and a boyish, slender figure. She wore a yellow shirtwaist and a deep green riding skirt, and seen against the strong sunlight glancing from the desert at the end of the street, her soft reddish hair took delicate fire. Gabe watched the struggle in her face as she came a couple of steps nearer.

She stopped, taking a slow breath, then

gulped out impulsively: "Mister, would you like to pretend you're a friend of mine and go with me while I see Linus Herrell again?"

Quick interest ran in Gabe as he swung down to the scuffed and splintered sidewalk. He tied the horse to the rack, two paces ahead, and let his long arms droop against his sides again as he turned back to her. He nodded. "If Herrell's going to swallow it, I'll have to know what you want to see him again about, ma'am."

She waited a moment, then said in a rushing voice: "We've always sold horses to that old skinflint, and he's tried to cheat us every time! He must have been planning this ever since Dad died last winter. He knows Andy and I've got to have money or risk starving. Maybe he can get away with it, but it sure riles me to let that fine stock go so cheap!"

Interest mounting, Gabe cocked an eyebrow. He said: "Maybe you better tell me more about yourself, ma'am."

"I'm Sabina Sills, and Andy's my kid brother. Dad ran a horse ranch on the Crooked, but he died of pneumonia last winter. He furnished Herrell with horses, but he was a spunky man and always managed to get fair prices. Horse raising takes an experienced hand, Mister, and Andy and I can't cut it. We're broke from trying, and now we've got to sell off the stock and the place. We got in here today with the string, and Linus Herrell told us he wasn't in the market. Yet he offered to take it off our hands at a pittance! He runs the bank and we can't get a loan to order stock cars and try to ship out. We can't even drive out afoot, on what little money we've got!"

GABE pursed thin, amiable lips and said softly, "A freight outfit as big as that always needs horses. I reckon you're right about him fixin' to skin you, miss." He looked at her, long and steadily. "Don't see why we don't fool him! I can use some horses. How many you got?"

"Fifty head. Some draft stock and some saddlers. The saddle horses're broken."

"I kin use 'em, Miss Sills." Surprise exploded in the back of Gabe's mind at this flat statement. He already had seventy-odd unemployed mules on his hands, only a fair little stake in cash in the money belt strapped around his lean middle, and only the beginnings of an idea in his head. A brash, untried idea, scarcely justifying any sizable cash expenditure.

Sabina was watching him with brightening hope. "You mean it?"

"Sure do. If you'll meet me after I've cleaned up and had some supper, we'll go take a look at those broncs." He was rewarded for his gallant foolhardiness by a quick surge of relief in the girl's blue-gray eyes, the warm look of womanly interest that swiftly trailed it.

Gabe moved on shuffling feet toward the shadows of the hotel veranda across the street. He registered, padded upstairs to scrub the trail dust from his face and hands, then came down and ambled on slack and skinny legs toward the restaurant at the end of the block.

This was a rough, raw Western town, a huddle of jerry-built structures crowded onto one rim-churned street, along which lengthening shadows now pivoted slowly with the setting sun. Off in the distance, somewhere beneath the flaming stretch of westward sky, a train whistle saluted, and sunlight blazed in the windows of a building across the street from Gabe, resulting from the vibration.

A man came out of the structure next to it, pacing up the sidewalk. He looked toward Gabe, the expression on his heavily bearded face an angry purpose which spewed mostly from small, agate eyes. Gabe coldly watched his approach. This had to be the man behind all the fussing; it had to be Linus Herrell, himself.

Gabe watched the man stalk toward him with bearded chin thrust forward, two ridges at the sides of his long black coat, greened with age and advertising his parsimony, suggesting a brace of six-guns underneath. Herrell paused in front of Gabe, squared his shoulders and said:

"A young feller likes a pretty gal, but I wouldn't get too interested in that one, was I you!"

Gabe turned calm eyes upon him, but they were eyes a discerning man would read as dangerous. He studied Herrell deliberately, tossed a half-consumed cigarette into the street's dry dust. "Was I you, I'd keep my advice to myself, Herrell!"

Herrell looked at him briefly, then grunted. "Heard you put up a pack string out at Jim Duffle's this evening, fella. You're just passing through these parts, I take it."

"You've took it wrong, Herrell. I'm setting up to pack outa here to Finley's Perch. I already met your tough Buck Tabor and got the same kind of scare talk from him. It didn't do him any good. Your talk ain't doing you any. And I'm hungry." He bobbed his head, turned on his heel, and passed through the restaurant doorway.

He left cold menace on the sidewalk outside, and he realized it with apprehension as he took a stool. He ate hurriedly, mindful of his engagement with Sabina Sills. His resolution had formed solidly now. He was going to buck Herrell with everything he had.

The Sills' horseflesh was first-rate. Gabe inspected it in the swiftly gathering obscurity of nightfall, but even then he could tell that. When they jogged back into town they had made a deal. He was using the horses, and beyond that, Andy Sills and his sister were to go to work for him.

"I'm going to run pack trains through Devil's Divide," Gabe explained. "The prospect of somebody doing that sometime's been worrying Herrell, I reckon, which is why he's so proddy about me showing up here with the string. So we're going to give him something to worry about. Man in the restaurant told me it's a long hard ride to Finley's Perch on one of Herrell's stages. I'm going to try a damfool stunt with your horses that had oughta work. Besides the packin' I'm going to run saddle strings through the divide to carry passengers."

The girl had followed his slow, drawling talk with surprise and mounting interest. "Why not? Don't pay me for the horses, Gabe! We'll go into partnership! You run your pack string and I'll run the saddle train! Andy can help out where he's needed!"

So the deal was made, and as Gabe left the girl and the button at the hotel and changed direction toward the noisy saloon, a solid satisfaction filled him. It was the feeling of a man who, having set his jaws in a man-size bite, was willing to risk choking on it so long as he had a show to chew it.

II

ACCOMPANIED by Andy Sills, a tow-headed and good-natured lad of eighteen, Gabe rode out of Freedom in the dawn's first light and headed for Finley's Perch, threading the already partly inspected route through Devil's Divide. They rode steadily through the morning's mounting heat, with the taciturn Andy lip-buttoned in the saddle beside Gabe. They were forking a pair of horses out of the Sills' string, young and spirited animals that put quick miles behind them.

As they pressed into the broken country, on the near side of the divide, Gabe's quick, practiced sight prospected it minutely, picking likely trails. They stopped to mark certain turnings, and a number of times Gabe rode back a way to investigate alternate defiles. Yet, as they put themselves northward, the satisfaction rose in him that he was leaving good, negotiable, well-blazed trail behind.

Devil's Divide was a break in the escarpment that rose sheer and angry out of surrounding fragments of tortured, chopped-up land. It lifted in vast loneliness, singular and dominant in this wild realm, a sharp and stony warning thrust against the depthless blue sky. Riding along its shadow, following a vague game trail, Gabe Eberly questioned briefly his puny human challenge to this massive rearing of nature's defiance, but he shook it quickly from him. The mountain was without cunning, inert, ageless, unchanging. Febrile and passing though he might be, a man with solid intelligence to offset his miniscule stature could beat that mass of forbidding earth.

Slowly, carefully digesting the miles they had left behind them, they made their way onto the narrow, upward climbing shelves, so high and breath-taking a weight seemed to swing in their stomachs. Men had crossed here before, men in a spanking hurry and impatient of the wagon road miles, but no one had tried to turn this way into a regular human thoroughfare.

Gabe did not wonder. Himself and mules and the hoped-for haulage he could throw across to Finley's Perch with its deep-grained trailing instinct. Yet he wondered now if the saddle train, with which he hoped to put wayfarers into the mining town and bring them out again in fewer hours than Linus Herrell's stages needed, could ever be made popular.

Unreckoned years ago the first coursers had crossed here, the wild things of

these reaches, and with primitive sense they had nosed out the easiest, safest passage. The shelving trail was wide enough and negotiable—if a man had stamina and could shut his mind to the fearful portent of the awesome height.

They crossed the summit close to noon, and ate sandwiches of beefsteak and thick, heavy bread, brought from the Freedom hotel, under a canopy of chill, misty blue air and heavy white clouds, then they pressed down the far slope. Now came more unending, ruptured reaches, through all of which Gabe Eberly picked and recorded mentally the straightest, surest course, and finally two hours short of dusk, they reached Finley's Perch.

The town gave the impression of an eyrie huddled in ugly profusion on another escarpment, less towering and terrible than Devil's Divide and seeming to loom above the gold-bearing hills that encircled it more in a benevolent custody. With their ponies lathered from the hard trail, the man and youth rode up the last long slant, which crested in an abrupt entry into the town.

Ramshackle structures typical of a mining town lined the long street, which dwindled into a flat, grassless bench that was now a wan russet in the early evening light. Gabe halted his horse, staring ahead to a double vacant lot just short of a big barn, tension coming into him. A half dozen of Buck Tabor's freight wagons, unhitched, their tongues dropped to a carpet of thick, yellow dust, were huddled there. The big Herrell outfit that had stopped Gabe on the other trail to Freedom had finally reached Finley's Perch. The button Andy followed the direction of the packer's gaze and said, with a flat grin:

"Gabe, it looks like we rode into a hornets' nest!"

GABE glanced at the boy quickly. Big of body, cool of eye, Andy Sills was feeling his young-sprout oats and looked as if he would enjoy a tangle with Linus Herrell's tough teamsters. Gabe grinned to himself, remembering his own days when he had grown beyond the size of his young breeches. He'd have to keep a close eye on this boy. He nodded in the other direction.

"Looks like a eating house yonder, Andy. Let's scare up a couple of steaks."

He had a lot to accomplish here, and he did not want to waste time. He had already spotted a big, log-hewn structure that announced itself as being the headquarters of the Blue Star, the largest mine. Coming out of the restaurant with Andy, a little later, he saw figures moving beyond its dirty window glass, which meant he probably could see his man yet tonight. He looked at Andy, jerking his head toward it.

"Want to come along while I drum up some business, kid?"

Andy shook his head. "I couldn't do you any good. Reckon I'll mosey around."

"Well, keep—" Gabe stopped in mid-sentence. He had been on the point of warning Andy to stay out of the saloons. He sensed, with a hearty man's sympathy for the remembered yearnings of his youth, that the kid was eager to cut loose a little. Gabe had already gathered that the pretty but firm-eyed Sabina had kept a close check on her younger brother, and this was likely the first time Andy had been out from under her thumb. Gabe had no intention of letting the boy get his first taste of grown-up pleasures; yet somehow he had sensed the fact that it would wound Andy deeply to be treated now like a kid. "Well, keep your fists in your pockets," he amended hastily.

Gabe found Boyd Stretcher, the Blue Star superintendent, in the mining company's office, and it required less than two minutes' talk to have the man sitting up with interest. "What it takes the freight outfits two days to do for you, I can do in one, Mister. I can haul machinery for you, and any other stuff you're in a hurry for. I'd like to have a chance at it."

Stretcher cupped his heavy shoulders forward, elbows on the desk, a piercing-eyed man of middle age. He began to ask questions, which Gabe answered with easy assurance. An hour later Gabe walked out of the office with instructions to pick up a consignment of stamp mill machinery, a job that would employ his full pack train for several trips.

It was eight o'clock when he turned out onto the sidewalk, elation building in him, moving on shambling legs toward the hotel. Yet the occasion seemed to call for a drink before turning in, and he changed direction abruptly and headed for what advertised itself to be the Gold Mug Saloon.

A ruckus was on inside, he realized as he paced toward the batwings. There was the hushing of voices that marked such affrays, talk-drone silenced and replaced by a scraping of plunging feet, a skidding of kicked furniture, the dull whacking sound of pumping fists. Not averse to watching such efforts, Gabe hurried his steps.

Standing in the batwings, he drew up short, eyes staring, rage spewing all through him. Buck Tabor was doing the major part of the fighting, down at the far end of the room where a ring had formed, his big body bent into a crouch, weaving, bobbing, maul-like fists pounding the daylights out of his opponent. And Buck Tabor's opponent was young Andy Sills.

Gabe shot the full length of the room in a dozen strides. But before he could intercede, Tabor smashed Andy to the floor with an impacting swing that sounded like a club on raw meat. Andy's heels left the floor, and his body arced as it crashed into the strewn sawdust. The kid did not move again.

With no thought of making inquiries, Gabe Eberly shot forward, shaking off the easy inertia that was so deceitful, his long body abruptly a steel spring unsnapped by seething outrage. Bellowing like some animal brought to bay, Buck Tabor wheeled to meet him.

THE pair came together in a tremendous crash. Then, intent and deadly and hating, they fought furiously half down the length of the bar, Gabe retreating, Tabor trying to circle and pin him helplessly against the mahogany. It became a fearful thing, almost quiet save for dull, disturbing sounds, and the stringy packer's fury changed to the calm, cautious, slowly grinding effort with which he habitually did a job. Tabor outweighed him by a wide margin, knew every dirty tactic of crushing assault and was trying every trick.

But Gabe knew them, also. He did not use them, but he was warned of them, had met them many times, and he knew how to handle himself. His retreat was an elastic defense, drawing Tabor out, causing him to keep stepping and reaching, and when Gabe had set the pattern of this in the man's slow mind and slab-like muscles, he abruptly changed pace.

Dancing away, he let Tabor's lunge carry him forward on suddenly uncontrolled feet, in the movement a man makes when a door opens unexpectedly ahead of his hand. In that instant, that split second of upset balance, Buck Tabor was a wide-open target.

Long arms V-ed to thin but steel-strung shoulders, Gabe came in on a boring, unmerciful assault of short, chopping blows, beating through Tabor's momentarily stripped defenses again and again. He built an awesome thing there in the middle of the floor, laid out in vivid detail the successive phases of a big and powerful man crumpling in utter defeat. A fist bouncing off Tabor's stubbled, sweating chin put a daze in his eyes, a left hook, closely following, set a lifeless look on his face. After that there was a huge body robbed suddenly of purpose, a hulk of flesh living but unheeding; then slackness let it slide in collapse to the floor.

In their room on the upstairs floor of the hotel, fifteen minutes later, Gabe grinned through battered lips at the eighteen-year-old sprawled on the bed. Andy Sills had got his taste of being grown up, and apparently he had found less relish in it than he had expected. He was actually in better shape than Gabe, Buck Tabor's chopping fists having put him out of the fight before doing much damage. But Tabor's fists had pounded something else into Andy's face, a look of defeat and bafflement and hurt adolescent pride. Gabe's grin faded at this, and at the smell of whisky that kept striking his nostrils.

When he saw that the boy was not going to speak of his own volition, Gabe prodded him with a question.

"What teched it off, Andy?"

Andy hoisted himself to a half-sitting position, eager to talk now that the subject had been broached, relieved that he apparently was not to get a lacing down.

"Well, I went into this place, and I guess I bought a—couple of drinks. Buck Tabor and some of them tough teamsters was there. I used to go along with Dad when we'd sell horses to Linus Herrell, and I kind of knew 'em. Buck asked me what I was doing trailing with you, and I up and told 'em we was getting set to put him out of business. They laughed and hoorawed me, and I got kinda riled. Then Tabor says ain't I scared I'd grow long ears aiding a measly mule skinner

and I jumped him." His eyes were baffled as he privately contemplated the ignominious consequences of that.

Gabe said, his gruffness only half masking the abrupt warmth that flushed over him: "Serves you right, kid! You gotta work up gradual to a he-cougar like Tabor."

"Sis's goin' to be madder than a wet hen when she hears about it," Andy added, as an afterthought.

"You're probably right." Gabe ignored the implicit plea that it not be he who told her, for there would be no healing that bunged-up face before they saw Sabina Sills again.

III

SHORTLY after dawn they rode out of Finley's Perch on the short-cut trail to Freedom. In the cold morning light, bleak with remembering, Andy Sills was a worry to Gabe. The lanky packer privately would have given much had it never happened. The way Gabe saw it, one of two things would come from it. The boy would take his beating to heart and draw into his shell, or he would bust loose suddenly, unexpectedly, on a course unhampered by seasoned reasoning. Neither way was a pleasant prospect.

Trying to pull the boy up out of himself, to give him a new hold on dignity, Gabe pointed and talked more than was his wont all the way back across Devil's Divide and down the Freedom-side slopes.

"You and Sabina'll be running the saddle train, Andy. It'll be up to you to guide your sis until she gets to know the country. Fix it good in your mind, because a feller could get mixed up and lost blamed easy!"

"Sure, Gabe. I could get us through, all right." Yet his tone was lifeless, tinged slightly with misgiving.

They reached Freedom at five o'clock, stopping at Jim Duffle's little ranch layout, where the mules and now the Sills' horses were being cared for. Sabina was there, waiting for them.

Yet the pleasant greeting faded from her eyes as her gaze swept the two riders. A steady, chilling scrutiny touched Gabe and bounced to light on Andy. From the hangdog look in two pairs of male eyes Sabina seemed able to read that this was not the result of any legitimate business.

"Well!" she breathed. "So a high old time was had at Finley's Perch!" Stumblingly, half defiantly, Andy explained it, and when he had finished she smiled coldly. "I'm glad you got the daylight whipped out of you, Andy! Now, maybe you'll behave yourself!"

Gabe shot her a warning look, understanding with a man's quick perception of such things that she was apt to produce a result the opposite of what she wanted. Yet she said no more, her eyes returning to his, cool and quizzical.

"As for you, Gabe Eberly, I trusted him with you! You can do all the rooting and tooting you want, but from now on leave my brother out of it!"

Anger spread through Gabe at this mother-hen attitude that was so distasteful to Andy, but he did not defend what had happened. He dismissed this slowly, forced it from him with a reluctant sympathy for her viewpoint. He was relieved, a little later, to see that Sabina was not going to let it make any difference in their business relationship.

"I've posted notices that the first saddle train'll leave for Finley's Perch day after tomorrow," she said presently. "I think I can count on fifteen or twenty passengers; some miners from up there are here on business and in a rush to get back to their claims. And we'd ought to pick up a few more coming in on the railroad train. But there's something that worries me, Gabe. Linus Herrell left town soon as he'd read one of my notices, today! He left in a spanking hurry!"

Gabe nodded thoughtfully. "The men who do his dirty work for him're on the other end of the haul. I gotta idea he decided the time'd come for a powwow with Buck Tabor."

By eight o'clock the next morning the mule string, loaded with the heavy and cumbersome stamp mill machinery for the Blue Star mine, was plodding along the slopes and defiles of the short-cut route to Finley's Perch. It was a well-trained pack string, minutely following Gabe's lead or responding to his crisp shouts and whistles from the dusty drag. By now Gabe had length after succeeding length of the country well fixed in his mind, and he moved with sure, swift confidence. They would be a weary bunch of mules, but with luck they should lose their burden at the Blue Star mine by sundown. He did not often punish them so, but now, considering all that depend-

ed on it, he felt impelled to crowd them.

A SENSE of warning began to alert Gabe at an indefinable point. Twice he saw movement, vague, obscured by the scrub, both times at some distance, and this was strange in country undisturbed by regular thoroughfare. The first glimpse set him to wondering if it hadn't been an animal; the second set the conviction that, if so, the animal was deliberately stalking him. Then, just after ten o'clock, it happened again, and this time a shaft of dazzling light splintering in his eyes warned that someone was spying on him with binoculars.

It would have to be Linus Herrell or some of his hirelings. Yet to have linked up with Buck Tabor and the teamsters, by now no more than halfway back on the longer route to Finley's Perch, Herrell would have had to ride a mighty fast trail. If this was Herrell, it was more likely that he was alone or had some hardcase roustabouts from his Freedom barns with him.

It was partly this circumstance and partly the natural, almost indefinable feel of danger to these open, macerated reaches of virgin country that made it difficult for Gabe to check his mounting apprehension. At noon, as he rested the mules and ate his own lunch in the looming shadows of Devil's Divide, Gabe slipped his hand piece from leather and by way of precaution stuffed a live cartridge into the cylinder where he usually carried an empty shell for safety.

The air hugging the rises grew cooler, yet man and animal of the pack train began to sweat from the exertion as the lower shelving was reached and crossed, with unlimited, precipitous switch-back turns in prospect. The heavy-burdened mules, hunkering down for abrupt lifts, muscles trembling, hoofs digging, turned black with sweat and grime.

Riding among them, now sharp, now gently encouraging, Gabe Eberly choked on the dust that filtered through the red bandanna tightly stretched across his face and which plastered his streaming cheeks with mud. Then, after what seemed an eternity, they lifted to the summit and were across it; and this abrupt change of pace, in pattern of plodding effort, was like a reprieve received at hell's very portals.

Even with this exertion behind him, Gabe's vague anxiety increased. It was as if his stalking enemies realized with cunning insight that the looming menace of the mysterious could strike deeper into a heart than could immediate, reasonable things. Crowding the mules more than he would have otherwise, his restless gaze never long in returning to sweep this bronze-touched lift and that silver-shadowed depression, Gabe put the tough miles behind him almost astonished that nothing occurred.

Yet the thing that finally happened was mental, an awareness that was like an explosion actually jarring his brain. *They aren't setting their trap for me,* he thought in this instant of understanding. *They're studying the ground. They're waiting for Sabina.*

It made sound, hard, unavoidable sense. It would yield Linus Herrell little profit to disrupt the movement of a pack train. A saddle train, carrying maybe a score of passengers and in the charge of a girl and an untried, already rattled boy would make better prey. It would spread discouragement and an epidemic of boycott throughout the entire country. Sabina would be coming through here tomorrow.

But Gabe Eberly had to press on. His agreement with Stretcher, of the Blue Star, had been to bring in the machinery with no delay greater than was required to rest and tend the mules properly. Not only was Gabe's prospect of future business in the balance; he had passed his word. The way things were shaping up, he thought with a wry, deeply disturbed grimace, much was going to depend on young Andy Sills.

It was a sweaty and ground-down packing outfit that reached the Blue Star mine shortly after seven o'clock that evening. Boyd Stretcher was on the premises, and he furnished men to help Gabe unload. The long-eared beasts were too tired to frisk and roll, this night, as was their habit when less exhausted. Before he drove them to the little mountain ranch below Finley's Perch, where he had made arrangements to feed and water and corral them for the night, Gabe listened to Stretcher's compliments: "Good work, Eberly. Keep on proving you can do the job, and we'll have a lot of it for you."

GABE rode into Finley's Perch at dusk, his big frame aching with weariness. He had just reached his hotel room and

was scrubbing his grimed face and hands, when there was a knock and a flat-headed, potbellied man opened the door in response to Gabe's grunted: "Push on it!" The visitor stopped just inside the door, closed it carefully, a slack and flabby figure dressed in the carefully brushed broadcloth of a man who disdains to work with his hands.

"You're Eberly, the new packer, aren't you?" The voice was low and silky, and at Gabe's nod it continued: "I'm Rex Deerford. Run the Emmaline mine. If you're fixed to go out on it right away, I got a pretty nice job for you."

Gabe toweled his face, studying Deerford between passes of the coarse cloth. Though he had not seen him previously, he knew instantly that he did not like the man. On his previous visit to Finley's Perch, Gabe had learned that the Emmaline was a small and dubious mine. Linus Herrell did all its hauling, and Gabe had also learned that this Deerford and Buck Tabor were close friends. Yet curiosity held off the blunt refusal that formed on his tongue.

"What kind of a job?" he grunted as he finished with the towel.

Deerford took a chair without invitation, reached inside his coat and pulled out a cigar, which he lighted carefully before answering. "It's like this. We're running a prospect shaft at a place on across the Mavericks. Only had two-three men over there, up to now. But things look promising, all to once, and I want to put a good-sized crew on. Only trouble is getting camp supplies and provisions over there. No wagon road. I was stuck until you showed up tonight. Only thing is, you'd have to pull out in the morning."

Gabe shook his head, lips flattening in a mirthless grin. "Out of the question. I'll be busy with Boyd Stretcher at least a week."

Deerford straightened, twisting a burnt match stick between thumb and forefinger, keeping his eyes on this intently. "It's important enough to me that I'll pay you double what you expected to make from Stretcher!"

Interest climbed in Gabe as he studied the proposition. Maybe this was legitimate business, and his packer's blood heated at the prospect of making bonus wages. Yet Deerford's words hadn't worked as smoothly as the man might have hoped. Deerford didn't realize that Gabe Eberly knew of his cronying with Buck Tabor. This could—and Gabe was inclined to believe that it did—mean one of two things. That a trap was being set for him over there beyond the Mavericks. Or that they wanted to keep him off the Devil's Divide trail tomorrow.

Conviction came to him as he shook his head a second time. Rex Deerford took the refusal with a sudden glint of the eye. Yet he did not argue further. Lifting himself, he strode toward the door, turning in the threshold.

"You can still change your mind before you pull out for Freedom in the morning, Eberly," he said, and pulled the door shut behind him.

Rather than a change of mind, a solid determination had formed in Gabe by morning. He was up at dawn, and he would have made it earlier but for the weary mules, whose well-earned rest he could not bring himself to interrupt. Yet he had them fed and watered and under their empty pack saddles and was on the Freedom trail by six o'clock.

Rex Deerford's proposition made sense, seen from the perspective of the skulking that had been done around Devil's Divide the previous day. By putting himself in Linus Herrell's position, Gabe had figured out that the attack on the saddle train, if such was scheduled, would come at the dangerous divide. Gabe was leaving early enough to put him there a little ahead of Sabina and Andy Sills.

He rode a fast and worried trail, sharp with the mules now, pelting the laggards with pebbles from the pocketful he carried, producing surprising bursts of energy with low, soft swearing. The animals had a hoofed-out trail to follow now, and they took less handling.

IV

THE hours of the morning slipped away. Yet even in the cooler air of the upper reaches, Gabe found himself sweating. Twice he saw signs that other mounted men had gone out this trail together. Working it slowly into a pattern of sense, Gabe decided that Linus Herrell must have gone on in to Finley's Perch the afternoon before, made contact with Rex Deerford, waited to hear that the lure-off proposition had been turned down, and then had returned this way.

He discerned that three men had been in this group. If Linus Herrell had managed to make contact with Buck Tabor and the wagon string, who by now would be on the Freedom end of the wagon route, there would be quite a contingent mustered for whatever was scheduled. Herrell could have contacted Tabor through a messenger.

Slightly before noon, Gabe came up out of a canyon to see Devil's Divide arising directly ahead of him. He turned the pack string into a small mountain meadow where good graze grass would keep it from straying, and swung back out onto the trail again unencumbered, this stepped-up and purposeful movement working the tension from him. He checked his six-gun, then pointed his horse into the lower shelving. He hoped to accomplish one of two things: to spring the trap if one was set, or to get through, meet the saddle train on the far side and come back across the dangerous reach with it.

Gabe covered the first twisting mile in record time, gaining perspective as he came out of the scrubby timber. Abruptly, without warning, his horse jerked itself to the right, reared, and when Gabe fought it back to its feet, began to dance, its trembling vibrating into Gabe's forking legs. Gabe quirted it, holding it to the spot, then swung to the ground, still having difficulty holding the horse by the reins.

Men had come down the bank here on foot, and they had dragged something behind them. Ten paces up the trail Gabe discovered the small dab of mud in the path of the dragged object which investigation proved to be blood. From his horse's action Gabe guessed what it had been. A cougar carcass.

The pattern was clear in his mind now. Herrell's men meant to spot it at a place on the high ledging where Sabina Sills' saddle train would come upon it with no slightest warning. It would panic the horses; in the melee that would ensue it would be apt to send some of them over the bank. And that carcass, as well as Herrell's men, would be between himself and the saddle train.

Straightening, stroking his long jaw in grim deliberation, Gabe pondered for a moment. He could not cross on over without being sighted by Herrell's men, and the sighting would bring a quick dry-gulching attack. Yet the very sound of such a ruckus would warn the Sills outfit. He knew that he had it to do.

He vaulted into saddle, lips pressed tightly together, and went pounding up the trail, no longer considering his mount in the sudden greater portent. He progressed another mile or two without interruption, with no signs of suspicious activity anywhere. Then, at the end of a long slant and coming upon a blind turn, his horse shied again, throwing itself in a spasm of automatically reacting nerves and muscles, and pitching itself toward the brink!

Swinging to the ground, Gabe found the cougar carcass, on the bank side and most of it buried, save for a small area of the great, tawny cat's flank where blood had ebbed from a gunshot wound, which had been left exposed to freight the air with a scent so greatly feared by animals. They had picked their site with care, Gabe observed. Coming from the other direction, the saddle train would bend abruptly around this sharp turn, with the lead animals plunging without warning into the midst of this panicking scent. A shudder shook Gabe's thin shoulders as he visualized what would happen.

THERE was every reason to believe that Herrell's men had their eyes on him now. It astonished him that they had not opened fire. Then surprise turned instantly to dismay as understanding reached him. They must have seen the saddle train coming! It must be so close that they feared gunfire would ruin the careful setup!

Clamoring into the saddle, Gabe pounded around the bend. Straightening long legs in the stirrups, he scanned the slants beyond. The saddle train was moving down a long, unbending slant, less than a quarter of a mile away.

He heard the explosion of a gun only a split second before his horse crumpled into a dust-kicking heap under him. Gabe shot over its head and landed on neck and shoulders in dazing impact, breath whistling from the concussion to his lungs. He pulled over, pulling in choking panic at a breath delayed in coming, scrambling around and slithering into partial shelter behind the still heaving horse, six-gun coming into his hand.

It was suddenly so quiet that his pulse sounded like a trip hammer going in his

ears. They did not shoot again, and he expected that they would not. Hipping around, he saw that the saddle train had pulled up, the score of riders stiffened in the attitude of surprised listening. With a groan, Gabe saw it start on.

"They figure it's just some stray hunter!" he told himself.

There was one way of stopping them, a way still dangerous to them and likely fatal to himself, and that was to erupt hot and bloody hell here and now.

The bank above the trail rose steeply, with a strip of detritus at the bottom, then a lift of rugged, bulging rock. After they had hidden the cougar carcass, Herrell's men must have taken stations where they could watch the payoff. The shot that had killed his horse, he decided, had come not from the top but from behind a huge round boulder that had been arrested in a pock in the bank in ages past, a little to his right. Swiveling back on flattened hips, Gabe studied it.

Then he triggered quickly, having seen a shadow, a small moving mass, as somebody up there shot a quick look down at him. Whoever it was, the man had not expected eyes to be on the very spot he occupied, and he drew back with a yelp.

Feeling that this should have warned the saddle train that trouble was just ahead, Gabe lifted from his shelter behind the horse carcass and started up the bank.

It drew them into the open. Realizing that their trap had been sprung and their scheme ruined, Linus Herrell came out from behind the rock, bent at a sharp angle against the rising bank, the gun in his hand blazing. Understanding that they had deemed it best to shoot their way out and get away, rather than to wait to be trapped and exposed, Gabe returned the fire, seeing other men—including Buck Tabor—pour in a blazing huddle from the high-hung shelter.

Gun chatter rocked sharply in the thin, high air. Gabe picked off a clawing, kicking, shooting man, briefly watched him straighten and pitch and somersault to the trail. A slug of undetermined origin dug a pock less than an inch ahead of Gabe's balancing hand, and as he jerked away from it unconsciously, he tottered for a perilous split second. Three men were now sliding down the bank on top of him, rolling, clawing for a hold.

Linus Herrell let out a scream as Gabe's lead found and pierced his body, sent it rolling like a barrel to the trail, to bounce across and on over the brink. Then light exploded over the whole divide, and a red haze hung abruptly before Gabe's eyes. He found himself slipping, yet he triggered and saw one of the two men now grimly stalking him slide into sudden stillness. Gabe's gun clicked uselessly in his hand. He saw Buck Tabor sense this and grin, then come on.

Now, surprisingly and with no apparent reason, Tabor clutched a sudden hand to his big chest, slipped, and started to roll. He was spinning like a top before the report of a rifle shot, from up the slant, reached Gabe's ears. Letting go his uncertain hold, Gabe slid weakly back

ANDY SILLS thundered up on his horse, Sabina flogging behind him. There was a grim look on Andy's face, and he held a saddle carbine in one hand. The look on his face was not of gloating nor of satisfaction in having evened the score with the man who had so sorely mauled his young pride. It was the maturity Andy had yearned for and he had come to it naturally, now, and in his eyes was a sick look that matched the feeling inside Gabe.

The stringy packer staggered to his feet. The girl had flung herself to the ground, and for the first time Gabe realized that she was looking at him with deep concern. It occurred to him that he was bleeding from his scalp some place, and he must make a pretty sight.

"Gabe!" Sabina gasped. "Are you all right?"

"Fitter'n a fiddle!" he told her, rocking on his feet. The rest of the saddle train was drawing up now. In the excitement of the moment, the swelling warmth that had stolen over him at the realization of her worry for him, Gabe had to inform her how good he felt, for all he was weak and kind of sick. Some mighty nice prospects had opened suddenly, with the removal of Linus Herrell and Buck Tabor from the scene.

He said, "Nothing wrong with me a smile won't fix, Sabina. A smile to tell me and Andy you forgive us for always getting into ruckuses, it looks like!"

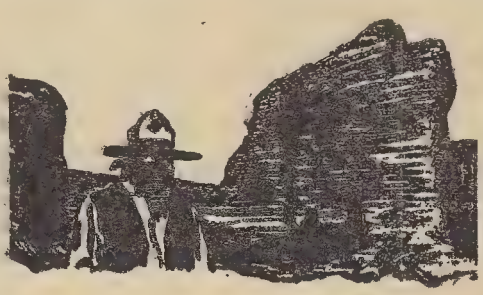
He got it, warm and full on the girl's lips. "Forgive you? Oh, yes, Gabe! If you and Andy can forgive me for being a cross, overly anxious woman!"

Lock-Box Cavern

By Nat W. McKelvey

The true account of Colossal Cave's buried fortune.

GALLOPING eastward from Tucson, a graying, middle-aged ex-convict spurred his buckskin bronc into the maze of hills footing Arizona's storied Rincon Mountains. In the glare of the desert sun, the man's unnaturally white face stood out like chalk. Lines of fanatical determination clearly showed around his watery blue eyes, at the corners of his thin, frowning mouth, and under his high cheekbones.



The motion of the horse, a sensation unfamiliar to him for a long time, set his mind racing. Thoughts formed, then words, half spoken, barely audible, the disjointed jargon of a man who has lived alone, shunning human companions.

"They say it's 1912," he muttered. "1912! Why that's a new century! Twenty-eight years. They kept me in that prison hole for twenty-eight years!"

He continued mumbling, his lean countenance contorted by hate. As he neared an upthrusting spire of rocks, in which is the opening to an almost endless underground passage, called Colossal Cave, he pulled up his horse.

Rising in the stirrups, he shaded his blurring eyes with a trembling hand. His gaze swept over the limestone ridge. Suddenly, his eyes quit their restless roving, pulled to one spot as though by hypnotism. Blood rushed to his temples. The down-turned corners of his hardened mouth twitched spasmodically.

"Thank heavens!" The words rushed out audibly on the tide of a great, gusty sigh. "Still there. It's still there! Open and waiting for me. After twenty-eight years. Still there. Still there!" Beside himself with anticipation, he babbled incoherently, almost hysterically.

Yet, eager though he was, the ex-convict did not move at once to the mouth of the cave. Instead, he pulled off down a nearby draw, where he waited fretfully for night to fall.

"Suppose someone has found it?" he mused.

TWENTY - EIGHT years before this bandit, for such he was, accompanied by three other daring young men, boarded a Southern Pacific train as it slipped from Pantano, a whistle-stop in Arizona's eastern Pima County.

In the train's baggage car, express agents busied themselves with an abnormally heavy load. Although the year was 1884, a time when train robberies were frequent, the express clerks sensed no danger. In the broad daylight, nothing serious could happen.

"Freeze!"

A harsh voice bruised the sweet reveries of the expressmen, ordering them to stand clear of their shotguns and Winchesters. Two masked men, Colt in each hand, held the trainmen at bay while two more masked bandits cleaned out the express car. When they found what they wanted, including sixteen bags bearing the Wells Fargo label, the bandit leader turned to one of his men.

"Tie 'em up, Buck," he ordered, "and make sure none of them can wiggle or yell, leastways not for five or six hours yet."

Buck, small and wiry, with pale, watery eyes and a face distorted by hatred for

humanity, moved to obey. With buckskin thongs from his pocket, he bound the railroad men, legs to arms, face down on their stomachs. Into their mouths, he thrust prepared gags. This done, Buck and his comrades dropped off the train as it slowed for a curve.

Down a half-hidden gully, protected by mesquite trees, the bandits hurried as fast as their load of loot would permit.

"Them horses better be there an' ready," the black-bearded leader snarled at Buck.

"Don't worry," Buck retorted, "they'll be there."

As he spoke, the men entered a wide place in the arroyo. Before them, in this natural corral, stood four cow-ponies, saddled and ready.

Swinging away at a gallop, Buck felt so good he couldn't hold back a shout.

"Good-by to the old S.P.!" he yelled. "I'm a bull rattler, and this is my day to rattle!"

Several hours later, Sheriff Bob Leatherwood of Pima County put his posse on the bandits' trail. Old Bob, whose name fitted him well—for his leathery skin and ironwood constitution—determined from the direction of fresh sign that the robbers were making for the Rincons, undoubtedly for the subterranean hideout called Renegade's Roost.

During the Civil War, as the sheriff knew, a Spaniard and an Apache fought to the death in the depths of this cave, initiating its evil reputation. Later, in the Eighties, robber bands like the one Leatherwood was now chasing renamed the cave the Bandits' Den.

Leading his men by way of a short-cut, Leatherwood presently brought his posse to a halt at the cabin of an aged Negro who lived in the Rincon foothills.

"Uncle Bob," Leatherwood questioned, his keen eyes drilling the old man, "you seen any bandits come this way?"

Kicking the burned ground with a bare toe, the old colored man answered.

"I ain't seen nothin', ya'all unnerstan', 'cause if I have, I'm a dead duck. But"—he inclined his wooly head in a gesture of shrewdness—"if ya'all look in the corral back of mah cabin, ya'all may find some hosses."

In the corral, the sheriff found the heaving, lather-stained mounts of the bandits.

Seeing the anger rise to Leatherwood's rough-hewn face, Uncle Bob spoke up defensively. "I done had to give 'em fresh hosses," he whined, "else they'd have kill' me sure."

His words were drowned by the clatter of the vanishing posse, hot for the chase. Straight to the entrance of Renegade's Roost, Sheriff Leatherwood and his men tracked the retreating robbers.

Riding hell-bent, reckless in their eagerness, the sheriff and possemen were gaining the slopes of the hill when a scorching volley from the cave's mouth flung them back.

"Get back," Leatherwood warned, waving a horny hand. "Those skunks aim to fight for it."

When the sheriff pulled his men to safety, he discovered two dead and several wounded.

From the posse's new location behind a protecting shoulder of rock, the sheriff swore. "By heck, we'll make 'em pay. We'll starve 'em out!"

The siege was on. But during an all-night vigil, neither the sheriff nor his men could find a target in the mouth of the cave. Even more puzzling, not another shot came from the rifles of the bandits.

For two more days and nights, the sheriff and his posse watched Renegade's Roost to no avail. Emboldened by the quiet and maddened by his inability to deal the robbers any direct misery, Sheriff Leatherwood himself crawled as close to the cave's entrance as he dared. Beside the gaping mouth, down on his belly in the brush, the sheriff yelled:

"You men'll save time if you come out now. If you don't, we're gonna sit here until you starve. Throw out your guns!"

He cocked his ears for an answer but got none. No one came from the cave. "All right," he warned, "if it's necessary, I can keep three or four men here forever."

As the afternoon wore on, the watchers spotted a lone cowboy riding toward them. Glad of an excuse to break the monotony of their isolated vigil, they hailed him, starting a conversation.

"Yeah," the sheriff was saying, "got those four bandits who did the S.P. hold-up sewed up in here tight. They won't come out, so we aim to let 'em starve."

With amazement, the cowhand heard the story. "Why, sheriff," he grinned

broadly, "you fellows are barking down the wrong hole. Them bandits was seen yesterday over to Wilcox!"

"I don't believe it," Leatherwood snapped. But the cowpoke accurately described the four robbers, and the sheriff could no longer doubt. Resolutely, with rifle cocked and ready, Leatherwood moved his iron bulk into the cave entrance. The bandits were gone!

While some of the posse stayed outside to watch, the sheriff and several of his men built fires inside the cave. Sure enough, in a few minutes a curling stream of smoke rose from the brush on the other side of the mountain. It came through a jagged gash in the rock, large enough for a man to crawl through.

A FEW months later, in the high, stimulating air of Northern Arizona's mountains, guns barked and howling lead wrote a death message. The four bandits were snarled with another sheriff and his deputies. This time, they had no double-ended cave in which to duck. Trapped, they tried to shoot their way out. But three were killed instantly. The fourth, the man known as Buck, was captured alive and unscathed.

Buck didn't have the loot from the S.P. robbery, and he wouldn't reveal its hiding place. So a miners' jury sent him to the penitentiary for twenty-eight years.

Now, with night dropping suddenly and the quick cool of the desert pressing against him, Buck mounted his bronc, emerging from his arroyo hideout. At the mouth of Renegade's Roost, he vaulted from the horse. As he groped his way to the entrance, years seemed to slip from his small frame. Before plunging into the black pit, he drew from under his shirt a miner's carbide lamp and lit it. Then he vanished into the darkness.

As best he could, Buck felt his way along the cold walls. At length, he reached a natural grotto, an overhanging ledge of limestone. Choking with excitement, he kneeled, his hands pushing at a pile of loose rock.

"It must be here!" he rasped. His weak, little eyes burned feverishly. In the flickering lamplight, he continued his blind groping. On the wall of the cave, his shadow made a grotesque outline, while the sharp odor of burning carbide filled the air.

Suddenly Buck's hand brushed something hard. Closing on it, he sprang upright, almost smashing his head against the low ceiling.

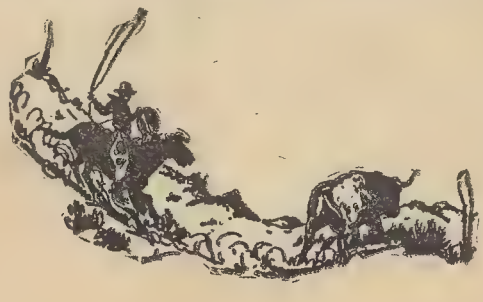
"Man alive!" he blubbered. "It's here. This is it!"

He dropped a bulging express sack to the ground, burrowed again in the widening hole. When he stopped, he counted sixteen sacks, intact, preserved by the dry air of Colossal Cave.

In 1914, while exploring Renegade's Roost, James Westfall, an Arizonian, came upon the sixteen money bags, empty! Authorities identified them as part of the loot taken in the 1884 robbery of a Southern Pacific train. Having kept his secret for twenty-eight years, the lone bandit had returned to recover his swag. To this day, nothing more has been heard of him.

Today, thanks to thousands of man-hours of work done by the young men of the C.C.C., Renegade's Roost, Bandits' Den, or Colossal Cave, is open to the public. Over its electrically lighted, concrete walks, eager tourists tramp in endless procession.

For many years the custodian of this historic monument, Frank "Pop" Schmidt, likes to tell awe-struck visitors how Buck, the bandit, once cheated the fabulous Wells Fargo Express Company of a cool $62,000 in cash!



Fugitive from a Hangtree

By

Wilson L. Covert

When Johnny O'Hey tried his luck at gold-digging, his only strike was a bullet claim. And before Johnny could cash in that unwelcome share, he had to sign for dividends in long-looper lead.

JOHNNY O'HEY angrily hurled his iron pick to the ground. For a month he had been pecking away at that hillside in the Chispa range, but it was all wasted labor. The few small nuggets on which he had built high hopes were undoubtedly an isolated pocket. He had heard old prospectors say it happened that way sometimes. And it was just Johnny's luck to have it happen to him after he'd fallen hard for Julia Allard, back in Horseshoe.

Wiping the sweat from face and neck with his bandanna, lanky Johnny turned sharply about at the click of iron-shod hoofs on the rubble around the hill's base. A half-dozen horsemen were pulling up below him. They looked like saddle tramps who wouldn't stop at killing to get what they wanted. Johnny wondered if he'd better dive for the nearest boulder and dig out his gun. He had two hundred dollars' worth of nuggets he wasn't minded to lose.

"Howdy, bub?" hailed a chunky moon-faced rider. "Any luck?"

"No luck, not even fool's gold round here," replied O'Hey easily, deciding that an assumed carelessness might convince them he wasn't worth robbing. "Figurin' to pack up and move on tomorrow. Grub's low."

The chunky man slid from the saddle, his companions following suit. "We're near out of grub, too. Let's throw in together and have one good meal."

Johnny wasn't pleased at the suggestion. He didn't want them stopping in his camp, but if he objected they'd suspect he had gold. O'Hey pushed the damp black hair off his forehead, slanted his battered hat forward and descended the hillside. His visitors turned their horses out to graze with Johnny's saddle bronc and pack burro, then produced a meager supply of food from a sack. Johnny did the same. It was nearly time for supper, anyway, though the young miner wasn't hungry. He kept thinking of the nuggets in his pocket.

Not until they were eating around the fire did the chunky man ask O'Hey's name. Johnny told him, and that he'd been a cowboy on a range southward, near a once-famed mining town, contracting gold fever from listening to the tales of old hard-rock miners. But he had nothing to show for a year's quest of the precious metal. O'Hey wanted to impress these wolf-faced men that he would be poor picking. And so bitter was his disappointment over his latest failure to make a strike, he rambled on. It afforded him a certain relief.

The chunky man, seated on a log, swigged coffee and grinned. "I reckon you're tellin' the truth, Johnny. Seen you heave that pick, disgusted like, as we come up. You didn't know it, but we've been in the neighborhood a day or two, watchin' you. I'll be frank. If we had found you takin' gold out of that claim, we'd have jumped it. Ever hear of Sam Rugg?"

"No," said O'Hey, his eyes narrowing.

"It's a name," the other said, "better knowed up north. I'm Rugg. Now, Johnny, you're broke an' eatin' the last of your grub. We're near as bad off. You and me can be useful to each other. This Rollin' River country appears like it might be good pickin's. Ranches, farms, a flourishin' little town and a stage line. But strangers attract too much attention. If there was a holdup of any kind we'd be the first ones suspected. Different in your case. If you was to work with us, goin' to town for grub and listenin' round for tips on express shipments and the like, we'd cut you in for a share of the loot."

Johnny O'Hey flatly refused. "I may be busted, but I have no hankerin' to get the law after me. If I'm a flop at prospectin'—and I guess I am—I can go back to punchin' cattle."

Sam Rugg eyed him shrewdly. "You'd 'a' done it before this if you hadn't wanted to make your pile quick. Got a girl, I bet."

"Yes, I have."

"And made your brag to her you're goin' to strike it rich!"

"Well," said Johnny. If he hadn't bragged to Julia, he had spoken confidently of finding his fortune in the Chispa range. Julia expected great things of him. He couldn't tell her he'd failed.

Rugg saw he was wavering. "Look, kid, we don't rob the poor. Just relieve the rich of surplus wealth. I'm not askin' you to take a hand in the stickups. You'll never be suspicioned. Your girl will never know. Tell her your claim's pannin' out."

Foggy Colfax, a gaunt man with a foghorn voice, urged him also. So did a tough-faced younger man, about Johnny's age, called "Kid" Doolin. O'Hey didn't give in at once; but, in the morning, he headed for Horseshoe with the burro trotting beside his mount, money for supplies in his pocket. The outlaws were camped on his worthless claim, henceforth to be headquarters of the Rugg gang.

HORSESHOE was quiet and orderly for a frontier town. Johnny saw ranch and farm folk in from the outlying range, none of whom he knew except by sight. As he tied horse and burro in

front of Budstone's general store, he heard a voice with a nasal twang inside and frowned. He wasn't keen to meet Hank Larksdale, the man who had grubstaked him. Hank sold real estate, lent money at a usurious rate of interest. He had gambled on Johnny O'Hey to please Julia Allard.

The young miner stepped in from the street with his packsaddle. Julia, who clerked for Ira Budstone, was back of the counter, the frock-coated, horse-faced Larksdale leaning against it. He straightened with a jerk, exclaiming:

"Look who's here! The very fellow we were talkin' of, Julia, wonderin' if he'd struck a lead or sloped with the outfit I paid for."

"You were wondering, Hank, not I." Golden-haired Julia's face had lighted up. "If you're not a welcome sight, Johnny! Any luck?"

Johnny said, "Yes," inwardly wincing at the lie.

Larksdale grabbed him excitedly by the shoulder. "The girl had faith you'd strike it. I didn't. Where's the claim? If you haven't recorded it, let's attend to that right now."

O'Hey thought quickly. He handed Julia a list of provisions, saying, "If you'll pile the stuff together, Julia, I'll pick it up later. C'mon, Hank."

Julia gazed after them a little hurt Johnny hadn't lingered to talk. Then she smiled. He was in a hurry to register the claim. Later he'd come back and tell her all about his discovery.

O'Hey hadn't wanted Larksdale to see that long list or the money he had to pay for the provisions. It would be easier to explain to Julia than Hank, though Johnny was troubled at the thought of deceiving the girl. He realized what he had let himself in for, but he couldn't back out now. He steered Larksdale for the nearest saloon, where they had a drink.

"First I've tasted in a month," observed Johnny. "Touches the spot."

"Have another," urged Hank, "then we'll go upstreet to the land office."

"Hank," said Johnny, "I'm not goin' to register that claim till I've located the mother lode. The minute I did, it'd leak out and everybody'd be stampedin' down there. That's sense, ain't it?"

"Why, yes," Larksdale tried to curb his impatience, "I guess it is. But you can take me back with you."

"Not this time. If we were seen goin' off together, folks would know somethin' was in the wind and trail us."

Larksdale said, half angrily, "I don't see why you're so secretive with the man who grubstaked you. Have you any samples to show—"

O'Hey pulled a buckskin pouch from his pocket, spilled the contents into the palm of his left hand, held below the bar top so that only Hank could see the little nuggets. Larksdale made a subdued sound of excitement.

"You've struck it, all right! If I join you outside town, Johnny, nobody'll be the wiser. I'll smuggle a pick and shovel."

"I owe you a hundred and fifty dollars for my outfit, Hank," said the young miner. "These nuggets are worth a couple of hundred anyway. Take 'em, and that squares us."

Larksdale pushed away the hand proffering the nuggets. "Forget the grubstake, Johnny. I want an interest in the claim."

"That wasn't the agreement, Hank. It's not comin' to you." O'Hey resacked the nuggets, pressed the pouch into Larksdale's hand. "Thanks for your help."

He stalked out of the saloon. Larksdale shoved the pouch in his pocket, his narrowed eyes following the lanky figure. Later, he saw O'Hey stop at the express office, on the south side of Horseshoe, as the young prospector was riding out with a heavily laden burro. Was Johnny arranging to ship gold dust, Hank asked himself. He hastened to the general store to interview Julia Allard.

WITHIN twenty minutes, Larksdale was in the saddle, following a horseman and a pack burro across the brown plains south of town. Once they vanished from the horizon, and Hank supposed they had dropped into a gully. He came to the descent into a ravine, where the tracks of horse and burro led downward. Seeking the familiar shapes in the ravine bottom, he was not aware of the man rising from the brush on his right and slightly to the rear. A spinning rope snaked out and noosed Larksdale. Dragged backward from the saddle, he got his gun arm free as he landed in the dust. A booted foot kicked the Colt out

of his hand. He looked into the muzzle of Johnny O'Hey's six-shooter.

"I kind of figured you'd dog me, Hank!" rapped Johnny.

Hank snarled, "I think you've dug a lot of gold already, and you owe me a share! Julia said you'd bought enough provisions to last you a couple of months. Maybe you ain't ever goin' back to Horseshoe. And where'd you get the cash? You were supposed to be broke when I grubstaked you."

"Hank," said Johnny, "I've wasted enough time on you. Stand up and get on your horse. I'll make sure you don't follow me again."

Larksdale sullenly rose and walked to his mount, the lariat trailing from his shoulders. From the saddle he cursed Johnny, who reached for the rope to tie him. Facing Larksdale's horse in the direction of town, O'Hey lashed it into a run. The animal would find its way there, a distance of only two or three miles.

O'Hey returned to his horse and burro in the ravine, and from there on carefully blinded his trail. He reached his claim in a gloomy mood. Some sodbuster had lived there before him, built a shack. Sam Rugg's gang were seated in the sun, their backs against the outer wall. While they unpacked the burro, Rugg asked Johnny if he'd picked up any useful information at the express office.

"Agent knows I'm a prospector," replied O'Hey, "so it didn't seem out of place for me to ask how often they shipped dust or other valuables from Horseshoe. Sometimes once a week, he said, but not regular." Johnny mentioned the trouble with Larksdale.

"The simplest way to handle that would've been to kill him," remarked Rugg. "It's not very definite about the express shipments, but you couldn't ask too many questions. We'll have to take a chance."

The gang rode away one night, leaving Johnny at the shack. They returned empty-handed from a stage holdup. O'Hey was rather pleased that they had got nothing, although it meant he was broke as ever. A second holdup, a week later, didn't pan out. Rugg told Johnny to hit the trail for town and see if he couldn't learn when a money shipment was coming through.

"Go visit with your girl," said the longrider. "Nobody'll think nothin' of your hangin' around town. If that Larksdale pesters you, you've got a gun. Use it."

Rugg and his men were currying their horses in front of the shack, after the fruitless night ride. The outlaws took better care of the horses than they did of themselves. Often their lives depended on the animals. Johnny was seated on a nearby tree stump. He didn't answer at once. Sam stopped wielding his currycomb to ask sharply:

"What the matter? Cold feet already?"

"Not exactly," said Johnny. "But it's pretty soon to go back there, and you've pulled a couple of holdups that must've put 'em on their guard. They may watch me. I'll think about it, Rugg."

The truth was that he disliked his renegade role more than he apprehended an encounter with Horseshoe citizens, whom he believed had no good reason to suspect him. Not wishing to argue with the leader, he got up and walked toward the shack. He had his eye on Rugg, but should have been watching Foggy Colfax. The gaunt outlaw blared:

"Johnny!"

O'Hey knew Colfax had his gun out before he swiveled, yanking his own .45. Foggy's weapon, aimed across his horse's bare back, roared. The slug cut Johnny's hatbrim. The outlaw was difficult to target without hitting the horse. But Johnny caught the cadaverous face in his sights and flaming lead made a gory horror of it. Foggy backed away from the horse and fell.

Johnny executed a fast sidling movement toward the shack, but Kid Doolin darted to cut him off. All the Rugg gang had swapped currycombs for six-guns. Johnny changed his line of flight, slamming lead at the hammer-tripping Doolin, but failing to knock him down. The young miner leaped around the side of the shack just as the bandits let fly together.

Ten yards from the rear of the shack was a ditch, dug by the sodbuster who had afterward abandoned the unpromising location. Johnny thought he might make a stand there, shooting over the top of the trench. He redoubled his speed, but the outlaws turned the corner of the shack as he was about to jump. A bullet hit him and he tumbled headfirst into the ditch.

Johnny lay face downward when the five longriders gained the lip of the trench. His hat had rolled off, they could

see the blood on his head and face without going closer. Kid Doolin grinned wolfishly and reached for his knife to cut another notch in the cedar stock of his gun.

"He makes the fourth, Sam," said the Kid. "That's more notches than any man in the outfit. Foggy's dead. How about promotin' me to right bower?"

The leader nodded, his gaze on the still form in the ditch. "All right, Kid. I'm sorry to lose Foggy. He should've bored O'Hey without warnin' him when I signaled. I seen Johnny had soured on the business already and it'd be safer to get rid of him."

"You want me to slip into town—" began Doolin.

"Never mind the stagecoach stuff," Rugg broke in. "Johnny said there was a bank in Horseshoe. It's more risky than stoppin' stages, but we'll make one good haul and dust out of the Rollin' River country."

JOHNNY O'HEY slowly raised up on an elbow. He was surprised to find himself alive, not even badly injured when he came to explore the wound in his head. Some time must have elapsed since he tumbled into the ditch, for the sun had passed overhead. Johnny's six-shooter lay where it had dropped from his hand. He sat up, listening for sounds of his late outlaw companions. They couldn't have looked at him very closely to make the mistake of thinking him dead.

Hearing nothing to indicate their presence, O'Hey climbed the side of the ditch, peered over. Men and horses were apparently gone. He walked past the shack. His bronc and burro had been left behind with Colfax's horse. Johnny threw saddle on his bronc. He thought the Rugg gang had hit out for the stage road, and he didn't intend they should find him on their return. He took along his burro.

Heading for Horseshoe, Johnny discovered the bandits' trail led in that direction. It was getting dark as the miner neared town. The tracks of the five horsemen showed they had preceded him. Johnny frowned. He owed them something in hot lead for trying to kill him, and he wasn't gun-shy. But the thought of being exposed as their former ally, if he faced them in town, disturbed him.

The young miner waited for night and the glow of lights on the main street before riding in. An undercurrent of excitement was at once apparent. There was a crowd by the bank building. Johnny had half a notion what was up before he questioned a citizen.

"Sam Rugg's outlaws stuck up the bank this afternoon," explained the townsman. "There was a street battle, but the gang got away. Sheriff Curry wasn't around at the time. But he's back now, getting up a posse."

Johnny looked around at the tense faces. Mingled with the townsfolk were ranchers and farmers. All had had savings in the bank. A middle-aged woman, seated on the bank steps, was lamenting the loss of money which would have been the final payment on a farm. A white-haired little cowman declared he would be broke if the money wasn't recovered. He had mortgaged his ranch to pull him through a bad season.

Johnny gulped. He felt in a measure responsible for the plight of these people. If, instead of allying himself to the Rugg gang, he had told Sheriff Curry about them, there wouldn't have been a bank robbery. Rugg had said they didn't rob the poor, but the old farm woman and the little rancher and plenty more like them couldn't be classed as wealthy.

O'Hey headed for Budstone's store. It was deserted except for Julia as he walked in, tossing his hat on the counter. He didn't think of his kerchief-bound head until he saw the girl's eyes widen. She asked:

"Did you meet the bank robbers on the way in and have a fight?"

He hesitated, then plunged. "I'm through lyin' to you, Julia. I got this wound tradin' lead with the Rugg gang, but I'm not deservin' of any praise as you'll presently learn."

She stood a moment speechless as he finished his tale.

"How could you do such a crazy thing, Johnny?" she burst out. "You say you did it for me. But you should have known I'd find it out in time and that I'd be heartbroken. You a bandit!"

"I wasn't in any of the holdups," said Johnny, "but I feel about as guilty as if I had been. Hated to tell you I had no luck in the Chispas."

Booted feet crossed the store stoop. Johnny wheeled about, right hand dropping hipward.

"Touch that gun and I'll blast you!" shouted Sheriff Curry, stepping through the doorway, with Hank Larksdale and a dozen others at his heels.

"Had your nerve showin' up here, Johnny!" cried Larksdale. "I saw you in the crowd at the bank and got the sheriff. I knew you couldn't be in town for more supplies. It struck me why you bought so much food the last time and where you got the money. That burro-load of provisions was for the bandits you'd throwed in with. I see you got wounded in the holdup this afternoon. That clinches it! No wonder you didn't register your claim. It was no good."

"You're right about the claim," said Johnny grimly, "but I didn't get shot durin' the holdup. First I've been in town for two weeks."

"You deny workin' with the Rugg gang?" demanded the sheriff.

"He can't deny it, Curry," spoke up the express agent. "O'Hey was askin' how often we shipped valuables the last time I saw him."

Johnny saw them coming for him, but didn't draw his gun. He smashed away with his fists as they closed in, floored one or two before they pulled him down, Larksdale striking viciously at his head with Colt barrel.

"Where's a rope?" hollered Hank. "Somebody get a rope!"

"Never mind the rope," bellowed Sheriff Curry, "till we catch 'em all. O'Hey knows where the gang's hidin' out. He'll lead us to them."

AS THEY dragged Johnny outside, Julia, with a sudden tightening of her lips, disappeared through a rear door. She lived with the storekeeper and his wife, had a room of her own back of the store. Julia had been raised on a ranch, had kept the boots, chaps and man's outing shirt she had worn in happier days when her father was a stockman.

Hurriedly donning these, tucking up her hair beneath her wide-brimmed hat, Julia slung old man Allard's Winchester in the hollow of her arm and sought a horse. Everyone, even Johnny, mistook her for a slender youth when she joined the horsemen gathering in front of the jail. She kept out of the light until the posse pounded away from Horseshoe.

O'Hey hadn't been at all reluctant to tell Curry where the Rugg gang had camped. They made the ride swiftly, but there was no one at Johnny's worthless claim. The possemen cursed Johnny, thinking he had led them the wrong way purposely. A fire was kindled near the shack. Sheriff Curry scowlingly confronted the prisoner.

"O'Hey, you can't get away, so why not put us on the right trail?"

"If I knew where Rugg's gang was," replied Johnny, "I'd sure tell you."

Hank Larksdale pushed the sheriff aside, got down on one knee and commenced pulling off Johnny's right boot.

"What's that for?" the peace officer asked.

"If we toast his feet at the fire," said Hank, "he'll talk. I had ten thousand on deposit at the bank."

Larksdale didn't know that Julia's Winchester covered him from beyond the firelight circle and that the sheriff's next words saved his life.

"Leave his boots on! I've never tortured a prisoner yet. Maybe Johnny will quit bein' stubborn by mornin'. If he don't, we'll hang him and see if we can pick up the outlaws' trail ourselves."

The men spread their blankets on the ground, since there wasn't room for half of them in the shack. One man went on guard, and the fire was allowed to die down. In the glow of the embers, a slender, light-stepping figure moved among the sleeping possemen, unerringly picking out the spot where Johnny lay. He knew it was Julia at the first touch of her hands. Once they were clear of the sleepers, he expressed his amazement in a husky whisper, "How'd you get here? Where's the guard?"

"I clipped him with a gun," Julia answered, "and here's the gun. It's yours. The sheriff dropped it on the store counter. I have a Winchester. Our horses are saddled, over yonder."

But, before mounting, Johnny thought it would be a good idea to stampede the rest of the horses and delay pursuit. He had all but two unhobbled when the guard Julia had knocked cold, came to his senses and began yelling. Johnny fired into the air and the horses ran wild. He raced back to the girl and hit leather. Men were leaping from blankets, aroused by the guard's cries, the shooting and the thunder of bolting horses. Johnny and the girl were riding out of six-shooter range

before the possemen discovered they had lost a prisoner. The red spurt of Colts slashed the night, then abruptly ceased.

"They found two of the horses didn't get away," said Johnny, as he and Julia pounded westward. "But it'll take time to round up the rest. Julia, it was wonderful of you to do this for me, and I hate to say good-by, but you'd better quit me here. I'm branded an outlaw—"

"If you can't go back," the girl interrupted, "neither will I. There's no one at Horseshoe I care much about leaving."

Johnny stammered, "Are you tellin' me that you—that I—"

"Figure it out for yourself," answered Julia.

They raced onward through the night, easing the pace when it seemed the posse wasn't behind them, although there had been time enough to recapture most of the stampeded horses.

ROSE dawn tinted the east. A spiral of smoke betrayed man's presence in a small ravine off the road where Johnny and Julia walked their horses. They reined in. Suddenly, in the growing light, Johnny saw the clutter of fresh hoof tracks made by not more than a half-dozen riders, if that many.

"I don't reckon it's the Rugg gang," he said, dismounting, "but I'll look. The tracks go toward that ravine."

Johnny turned into the brush and crawled out on the rim of the gully. He sucked in his breath, his eyes glinted, when he saw the five men finishing breakfast at a small fire. They believed themselves safely beyond pursuit. Johnny returned noiselessly to the road, announcing:

"It's them, Julia! The bank money's in sacks, piled beside their horse gear. They'll be ridin' soon, unless I can stop them. There's no chance the posse will ever find that gang."

Julia seized his arm. "Let them go, Johnny! You'd be riddled without doing any good. And if the posse should catch you you'd die just the same—by a rope. You didn't help to steal the money, so let's get out of here while we can."

"I feel partly responsible for the robbery, Julia. When I think of the old farm woman and the little rancher not gettin' their money back unless I jump the gang—well, I've got to do it. You know I'm right."

She looked at his set jaw and her hand slipped from his arm. "Yes, I do know it, Johnny. I'm proud of you, and at the same time I'm afraid. But the two of us together—"

He gently drew the Winchester from her clasp. "I'll fight better if you're not in it. With this saddle-gun, the odds won't be too tough."

Johnny left her standing in the road, stole back to the ravine and flattened on a point which jutted out five feet or more. He noticed that the baked earth was rather crumbly, but believed it would support his weight. The outlaws were packing to ride on west as he slanted the rifle down and yelled:

"You ain't goin' nowhere, boys! Reach for the sky!"

Sam Rugg and Kid Doolin did a lightning-like about-face, with Colts in their fists. The other three were a little slower getting their guns out. They all stared as if they couldn't believe it was Johnny in the flesh.

At that instant, O'Hey felt the projection giving way under him. He was shooting downward before he could scramble back to firm ground, the Winchester flying from his hand. Johnny struck bottom twenty feet below, buried to the knees in crumbled earth. Through the dust rising around him sped stinging lead. He threw hand to holster—the six-gun hadn't jolted out.

Johnny bent forward as far as he could for his trapped legs, trying to work them loose while he answered the Coltfire. The dust was settling rapidly, but his first shot evidently missed. His lips thinned grimly—five bullets, five outlaws. He couldn't afford to miss again. Two men sprawled down as muzzle fire blasted from his gun. His legs came free, and he felled a third bandit as he crouched on the mound of dirt.

Rugg and Doolin were still pumping lead. But the Kid's legs suddenly turned rubbery. A bullet punched Sam in the midsection. He staggered a step or two, his Colt trailing smoke, then fell heavily on his face.

Johnny rose slowly, bruised and bullet-nicked. Startled by a scream from Julia, somewhere above him, he jerked around and saw men running along the ravine wall—the posse he thought he'd outridden! Hank Larksdale was waving a gun and yelling:

"There he is, boys! Looks like him and his pals had a little argument over division of the loot!"

Larksdale's Colt chopped down. O'Hey had no bullets in his .45. Attempting to jump sideways, he tripped on the lumpy earth. His right hand encountered something hard and smooth as he fell—Julia's Winchester! Its barrel might be clogged with dirt, but he'd have to take that chance.

He snapped up the weapon, came to his knees with cheek against stock as Hank triggered again. The Winchester flamed. Hank flung up his arms, tottered to the brink of the ravine and plunged into space. Johnny glanced over the rifle sights at the other men lining the wall.

"Where's Julia, sheriff?"

Curry spoke over his shoulder. "Bring the girl here, Mullen."

Julia appeared with a burly posseman gripping her arm.

"You must think a lot of this outlaw, Miss Allard," said the sheriff. "We figured it was some of Rugg's gang helped him get away. Took us a while to catch our horses, but by ridin' hard we finally sighted the pair of you. Thinkin' you were goin' to rejoin the gang and that we'd recover the bank loot, we trailed you without your gettin' wise. I'm surprised a girl like you would run away with an owlhooter."

"Johnny never stole anything," said Julia, "and regretted getting mixed up with the bandits. He tackled the gang alone because he thought they'd get clean away with the money, and felt he owed it to the people who'd been robbed of their savings to get it back for them. Don't you think he's made amends for his misstep?"

The little white-haired rancher was one of the posse riders. He spoke in a high-pitched voice, "I do! I wouldn't lay a finger on Johnny!"

"The bank money's over yonder by the saddles," said O'Hey. "I didn't know how I'd return it, you were so bent on lynchin' me."

The sheriff nodded. "Larksdale didn't wait to find out the real reason you were fightin' the gang. Just opened up."

"He had it in for me anyway," replied Johnny.

"I know he did," said Sheriff Curry. "Put down that rifle, Johnny. There's no warrant out for you, and there won't be."

Johnny lowered the Winchester. The sheriff and his men descended the side of the ravine, Mullen assisting Julia Allard. She put her hand in Johnny's, a glad light in her eyes, as she reached the gully bottom.

"If you're through with us, sheriff," said Johnny, "we'll be goin'."

"Where?" asked Curry. "Better wait around and ride back with me to Horseshoe. There's a big price on the heads of the Rugg gang. I'll see that you collect it." He grinned. "Set you up in housekeepin'."

Johnny blinked in surprise and turned to Julia. "What do you say, honey?"

"Why not, if it's coming to you?" Julia smiled. "It might even be enough to buy that ranch we were talking about."

Dude Trap Boomerang

By Paul Craig

(Continued from page 26)

Dudes were strange people, but he liked these two. They'd be a pair for Dex to ride the river with. He wished he could tell them that, and how sorry he was for what he'd thought, but it is difficult for an uneducated tongue to frame such thoughts. He could only say:

"Thanks for the grub, miss! Maybe I'll ride on in to Round Up and tell Dex!"

"Yes, Hutch! And—and *hurry!*"

The last thing Hutch heard as he went out the front door was Sheriff Chown bringing his crime theories up to date:

"There, now! That little hole's putting you behind bars, Pattee, and getting Bill Bagley out from behind 'em! Don't that prove my notion, Doc? What a man's done successful once, he's apt to be fool enough to try again!"

.45's Fan a Fire

Clint Farrel had reached the end of his rope. For his harness shop had been torched, leaving him only one trick saddle to his name. But if Clint could ride that smoke-branded heritage through an outlaw gantlet, he might win a new lease on life—or a hangnoose.

By Conrad G. Feige

THE fire had been set deliberately. Clint Farrel instinctively sensed that, but he couldn't get over the feeling that his soul was shriveling within him, seared by the crackling flames that were consuming his little saddle shop. Dazedly he stared at the roaring inferno that sent sparks leaping high into the red night, unaware of the citizens of Lost Nugget hemming him in, of

the discarded pails of the bucket brigade.

Clint was thinking of Ann Selby, her big brown eyes, and the plans they had dreamed together. This saddle shop, crashing into crimson ruins, had meant their future happiness.

Thad Hollister came over to Clint and clamped a heavy hand on his shoulder. "Tough going, son," he said, pushing his sombrero back, revealing snow-thatched hair. "Seems like Lady Hard Luck is doggin' the both of us."

Clint nodded dully. Hollister had staked him on this latest venture; the best friend a fellow could have. Two years ago Clint had drifted into Lost Nugget, destitute and hungry, unable to get a job punching cows, for the limp in his right leg had been bad then. He had gone up to the Hollister Mines and asked the bearlike oldster for a job. Hollister, frowning, had noticed the cow waddy's condition and invited Clint to join him in a feed at the Red Lantern Café.

"How'd you get the game leg?" the mine owner had asked frankly, later, over a well-laden table.

"Up in the rodeo at Cheyenne," Clint said. "I forgot to put enough glue in my kak seat."

Thad Hollister had liked the shock-headed young puncher's spirit. It seemed there was no skilled saddle maker in Lost Nugget and he needed someone to repair his mule's mine harness, his saddles and divers other odds and ends. Clint had a little experience along those lines.

"You can take Old Dave Lockstitch's place," Hollister outlined. "I'll stake you to a start and throw all my business your way."

Clint had accepted the proposition, only he was hard put to listen to the deal, for it was Ann Selby who waited on their table.

Hollister motioned at the glowing ruby framework of the building. "What started it?" he asked wearily, and wiped his sweat-beaded brow with a red bandanna handkerchief.

"I don't know," Clint said, left hand clenching whitely about the pommel of the only saddle he had managed to save. "I woke up in my bunk to the rear and thought for a second that I had arrived in hell, it was that hot. Flames were everywhere and I barely had time to slip into my boots and levis. Only something struck me curious—" Clint hesitated.

Thad Hollister noticed. "Spit it out, son. After all, we're in this together."

Clint wet his heat-parched lips. "I'll spill it to you later. There's too many stray ears hereabouts."

Hollister swore under his breath. "How about the saddle? Did you manage to save it?"

"This is the one," Clint said, and his blue eyes narrowed as he surveyed the motley crowd about him.

"Good," Hollister stated. "And don't worry too much about this fire here. If your idea works, I'll see to it that you come out on top. Hoist that kak and let's head up the slope to my cabin. I got an extra bunk you can use for the night."

THEY tromped down the boardwalk, passing the false fronts of the buildings, the hitch-rails with only a few cayuses left, heading to where a huge tailings dump marred the pine-forested mountain in the distance. At the further end of town things were quiet, and only the amber glow of light from the Buckhorn Saloon guided their footsteps.

"Hollister, Clint," a voice called, and they waited as a tall man came running up to them.

Thorpe Regan halted before them. A lanky individual, rather homely because of a large beak nose, his gray eyes appraised them worriedly. He was Hollister's mine foreman and it was his driving energy and supervisory abilities that made the gold mine pay dividends. Only lately, even his endeavors had failed to keep the mine from going in the red. It was one thing to make men work and produce, it was another to cope with stagecoach bandits who plundered the hard-won yellow ore.

"I thought the whole town was going up in smoke when I first heard the uproar," Regan said, then stopped, glancing sharply at the saddle over Clint's shoulder. "Is that the kak, the one you been working on?"

"Clint managed to save it and this is it," Hollister replied. "Come on up to my place. We got plans to make."

The mine foreman joined them. They left the boardwalk and started following a muckers' trail that led to the stamp mill higher up, now in black silhouette against a late rising moon. Dump trucks

stood hunched near the end of the ore pile. Hollister's cabin was further above, to the right of the gaping maw of the tunnel itself.

They climbed steadily while the trees turned to pale silver as the moon balanced on the peaks of the Sangre de Cristos. The smell of smoke still clung to Clint, but up here the air was fresh, reeking of pines and aspen. Now and then Clint twitched his nostrils, questing for that certain other odor. It came again, kerosene fumes hanging close to Thorpe Regan beside him.

Clint dumped the saddle within the doorway of the cabin as Hollister lit a lamp. This main room wasn't big, but it was well furnished, characterizing its owner. A fireplace with a couple of muskets crisscrossed above, a huge bearskin rug on the floor, several rawhide bottom chairs, a shelf full of books and some outdoor pictures hanging on the walls.

Hollister turned to Clint after dropping the flue in place. Tiredness was in the seams of his ruddy face. "Back in Lost Nugget you said you had something to tell me," he said. "I'd like to hear it."

Clint looked at him squarely. "I got the notion somebody set my place afire on purpose."

"Why'd anyone want to do that?" Hollister demanded. "Hell, man, you ain't got an enemy in the whole town."

"I smelled kerosene when the fire first roused me," Clint said. "It was strong, just like the fumes clinging to Regan here."

Thorpe Regan, about to sit down, unlimbered back to his feet. "Are you inferring I set your place on fire?" he asked coldly.

"Nothin' of the sort," Clint said. "All kerosene fumes smell alike."

Regan's hand, that had gone to his armpit holster, dropped back to his side. "Sorry if I'm a mite edgy, Clint, but the way things been going—and I reckon I do smell like kerosene. When I first spotted your place burning. I got overanxious in my shack. I upset the lamp and spilled the stuff all over me."

Hollister's square-cut face eased, and his keen blue eyes relaxed. "The main thing is that Clint saved the saddle. Clint, bring her over. I want to see how you fixed it up."

"Mebbeso you'd better pull the shades," Clint said, dragging the heavy saddle over to the table. "We can't afford to take any chances."

HOLLISTER and Regan pulled the blinds as Clint hefted the bulging pommeled saddle onto the table. The mine owner and his foreman joined him. Swiftly Clint unlaced the tie straps on each side of the pommel, then grasped the horn and pulled back. His movement showed the interior of the bulges hollow.

"Thunderation," Hollister exclaimed. "You made that bulge just as wide as if you'd tacked bucking pads onto it. That'll hold a good week's run of gold inside."

Clint grinned, proud of his handiwork on this saddle.

Regan rubbed his long fingers together in evident satisfaction. "Maybe now," he declared, "we'll get some shipments of gold through safe."

Clint clamped the pommel back in place. "Your main problem," he reminded them, "is to get a man you can trust to deliver the ore."

"Shore," Hollister said. "And I've got him."

"You mean Mike Tarrant, the straw boss of the blasting crew?" Thorpe Regan hazarded.

"Nope," Hollister said. "I'm meanin' Clint hisself—and we're shipping first thing come mornin'!"

So it was that the following sunrise found Clint heading out of Lost Nugget on a disreputable Apaluche mare. His outfit was plain, inconspicuous, and that was as he wished it. And reposing in the false bulges of the saddle was an even eight thousand dollars in gold, especially made in small-sized bars to fit in the hollow aperture.

Only one thing irked Clint as his cayuse started up the rough road that led to the Devil's Head Trail in the red rocks district twenty miles away. As he had left Lost Nugget, with his mount's hoofs plodding noiselessly through the muffled dust of the main street, he overheard Thorpe Regan say to Hollister:

"Eight thousand in gold is a lot of dinero, Hollister. And Clint Farrel ain't got a thin dime to his name."

"Man, you talk like a fool," Hollister declared sharply, and that was the only thing that had kept Clint from wheeling

about and ramming the lanky mine foreman's words back down his throat.

Clint traveled leisurely so as not to arouse suspicion. Six miles from Lost Nugget the road started snaking sinuously as it followed the twisting course of Indian Creek. In this part of the country he had nothing to fear. Here was only rolling pine forest, thick and nearly impenetrable for man and beast.

It was farther to the east, where the recumbent form of the Devil's Head reared itself, that the stage robberies had always occurred. There, in the labyrinth of red rocks, inhabited by snakes, reptiles, chattering coyotes and howling wolves, the outlaw pack sprang forth with the deadly venom of a striking rattler.

Clint's lips were grim as he recalled the holdups. A leak of information had always betrayed Thad Hollister to the outlaws. And shotgun messengers were useless. One masked outlaw, suddenly appearing on an escarpment of red shale, could command a dozen below him. Once Hollister had tried to send his gold through the badlands by a convoy of armed riders. A short-fused stick of dynamite thrown in their midst had caused complete havoc. After that the mine stages were hard put to find even a gun guard.

The only time in the last two months that a shipment of gold had gotten through was when Thorpe Regan did the trick. And Regan had come back from Eagle Butte, shaken and with a livid scar along his right forearm where a bullet had seared him as he had made a running fight with the bandits. But Regan wanted no more of shepherding the mine gold through the badlands.

"I'm hired to operate your mines," he told Hollister. "That's my duty, and from now on I'm staying put."

CLINT'S eyes narrowed when he rounded a huge boulder in the trail. Before him lay the countless, ugly pinnacled domes of the red rocks area. The mid-morning sun was already a white-hot stove lid and Devil's Head Trail lay stark and staring beneath it. High overhead a buzzard wheeled lazily while nearer at hand the heat lashed silently back at him from the barren rocks.

Soon the road, composed of rubble and quartz outcropping, lifted higher until it clung to the top of the ridge with Indian Creek a mass of foam-lashed water far below. A watcher anywhere in the red rocks could see him clearly now. Deliberately Clint pulled a harmonica from his pocket and ran his lips across the key holes:

Oh, Susannah, don't you cry for me
I'll come back from California
With a bag of gold dust on each knee.

Clint's blue eyes, under the brim of his sombrero, were roving penetratingly. If a masked outlaw was watching the Devil's Head Trail, he wanted to be the first to sight him. Suddenly a cold knife blade ran up and down his back. A quarter of a mile ahead of him a black raven had wheeled wildly into the sky and gone arrowing back to the wasteland.

The young saddle maker's lips went taut, settling onto the brass of the harmonica. He had the hot feeling of eyes upon him. Now was the time to appear nonchalant. Easing about in the saddle, he draped one leg over the pommel, at the same time managing to bring his right hand nearer to the checkered walnut grip of his forty-five. The Apaluche pricked its ears as he swung into the rollicking tune of *Turkey in the Straw.*

Shallow gullies now pockmarked the red rocks. An army might hide in any one of these draws. Up here on the high road everything was quiet. Only a faint moaning of the hot wind through the queerly eroded red shale outcroppings. That and the murmur of Indian Creek down yonder as it cascaded madly onward, heading for the quieter waters of Milk River Canyon several miles farther on.

Clint's nerves screamed with the tight strain. The Apaluche's hoofs rang loudly on the hard rock. What a hell of a chance to take, his life for a measly eight thousand in gold. Then he thought of Thad Hollister, how the oldster had befriended him, the hearty generousness of the towering mine owner. A vision of Ann Selby crossed Clint's mind. Her brown eyes had been wide with concern as he ate his breakfast at the Red Lantern Café that morning.

"Clint, your nice little saddle shop. I'm so sorry."

Clint had grinned wryly. "I guess I kinda feel that way myself," he agreed.

"Now I'm afraid I can't ask you to marry me."

"But you can, Clint," Ann said, impulsively placing her hand over his. "I have nearly two hundred dollars saved up. That will help you get a start."

Thinking of it that way now, Clint grinned, missing a note of *Old Ben Blue.* Ann Selby certainly did pin a heap of faith in him. Somehow, he was going to make things right by her. His leg was getting better with the years; he could go back to punching—

The hiss of a black snake sailing past him caused Clint to cringe. Flashingly he knew the snake was a rope and felt the manila curl tightly about his shoulders. A savage yank sent him plunging earthward. Clint lit hard, breath whooshing out of him, and felt his head crack against a stray boulder. He tried to shake the cobwebs away, heard a hoarse voice behind him and turned to see a hooded figure come leaping at him from behind a mass of jumbled red rocks. There was no ducking the upraised six-gun butt that batted cruelly downward.

Instantly Clint's head exploded into a hornet's nest of pain and roaring blackness.

THE feel of his body being dragged over cutting shale roused Clint back to reality. He tried to move, to ease the rasping pain, then cursed when he found that his arms were bound behind him. Two men had hold of his boots and were pulling him to the edge of the road. The outlaws were still masked, but in their labors at moving him, one man's hood had slipped. A thatch of red hair showed below the brim of his dusty gray Stetson.

"One, two, and heave," a voice grunted.

Clint's muscles bunched when he guessed what they were doing. The feather sensation of flying verified his worst fears. The bandits had hurled him over the road lip to go plummeting down to Indian Creek far below. Wind began to whistle about his ears, and even as he fell, Clint marveled at its cooling effect on his hot face. He pinwheeled once, got a glimpse of blue sky high above and two hunched wolflike forms watching his rapid descent. The next second his feet slammed into a protruding rock with shotgun pain and he was caromed farther out into thin air.

That one streak of fate saved Clint Farrel's life. He had been lancing straight for the foam-lashed rocks near the stream's edge. Now, pushed farther out, he was going to land nearly center into the swirling waters.

Clint's body hit the raging torrent with a pistol-like report that echoed in the narrow confines of the canyon. Immediately he was enveloped beneath a blanket of liquid ice. The water pulled him relentlessly down, rolling him over and over on its gravelly bottom, suffocating him with its even pressure. Clint tried to kick his feet, to flail for surface, but his bound arms made him helpless. Once he bobbed to the surface like a cork, gasped avidly for air and was sucked back down.

Clint came up again and the canyon walls were two red blankets sweeping swiftly past. Slimy green rocks slashed at him with tentacled claws. Then, aghast, he saw that he was knifing at a jagged black boulder with express speed. He tried to evade it, but too late.

The shock of his body ramming the stone was like that he had at one time experienced when a full grown steer he was bulldogging had fallen on him. There was the same belly-aching feeling of air-emptied lungs, of incredible weight and hot branding-iron pain.

Then Clint was swept past the boulder to continue his mad pace. Only something had happened. Now he was fighting the water with freed arms. The impact of his body against the sharp stone had severed the rope in two.

For long minutes Clint's labored breathing sounded in the lee of the willow brush where he had grasped a branch and pulled himself onto the stony bank. He had no fear from the outlaw guns above. A bend in the canyon had hidden his movements. His body ached as if a thousand clubs had bashed it and air still rushed into his burning lungs like cooling camphor. His reeling head felt like a comet tearing madly through space.

One thought drummed through Clint's mind. Again the outlaw pack had discovered Thad Hollister's method of shipping gold. Thorpe Regan's words rang in his ears: "One of the owlhoot brand is here in camp spying on us, or they got a powerful pair of binoculars back in the

hills and are keeping track of our movements that way."

Stars were studding the sky when Clint again cautiously entered Lost Nugget. He was a disreputable figure, limping on his right leg, his ripped shirt and levis covered with alkali dust. His head was clear now, but his body ached with the beating the stream had given him. The yellow lights of the town watched his movements like the amber orbs of myriad beasts. He stuck to the dark alleys, for of one thing Clint was certain. Whoever had heaved him bound over the Devil's Head Trail hadn't wanted him to return. A vague hunch was forming in the background of his mind.

WHEN Clint came to the rear of the Red Lantern Café, he paused. The sound of someone doing dishes caused him to open the screen door and slip inside. Ann Selby turned, startled, her eyes wide when she saw him standing by the stove on which the remains of the evening meal still simmered.

"Clint," she gasped. "You're hurt. What happened?"

Clint didn't dare tell her that he had tried to push through the badlands with Thad Hollister's gold and failed. He wanted that kept secret. As far as he knew, that deal was only known by Hollister, Regan and himself—plus the bandits!

"Had a little ruckus with my horse over by Thunder Mountain Pass," he said, conscious of the lie. "He got the best of me."

Ann came over to him swiftly, wiping her hands on a frilled blue apron. Clint had never seen her cheeks so flushed, nor her hair so shiny. And it pleased him no little to see the anxiety she manifested for him.

"Here," she said, taking his arm, leading him to a wash basin. "Let me wash the dust off you and bandage your head."

"Sorry, Ann," Clint said. "I ain't got the time right now. I'm wantin' to borrow that Colt forty-five your father left you when he passed away."

"You're in trouble," Ann said, her hands going stiffly to her sides.

"A little," Clint admitted. "But mostly I'm wantin' it in case a hunch I got turns out right."

Ann stared at him for a while, biting her lips. Abruptly she pivoted on her trim heels and left the room. When she returned she had the gun in one hand and a small clamped fistful of shells in the other. She handed the stuff to him silently.

Clint filled the chamber with fresh cartridges and dropped the hogleg in his holster. "Thanks for believing in me, Ann," he said simply, and whirling, he barged back out into the night.

There was a light in Thad Hollister's cabin when Clint forged his way up the mountainside. He was a lone form there on the trail, heading for the ghostly black outlines of the mine, his lips clamped into twin strips of steel. He only hoped he would find Hollister alone.

The murmur of voices halted Clint outside the mine owner's doorway. He recognized Hollister's booming voice soon followed by the deeper drawl of Thorpe Regan. Grasping the door latch, Clint gripped his six-gun and slammed into the room.

Hollister and Regan whirled in surprise. Their eyes ogled as they stared up at him from some papers on the table. It was hard for Clint to gauge who showed the greatest astonishment.

"Clint," Hollister said, shoving the papers from him. "You back already?"

"I'm here," Clint said stiffly. "Regan, keep your hand away from that hideout gun."

Hollister looked dazedly at Clint, then back at his mine foreman.

"Clint," he said sternly. "What's the meanin' of this?"

"I'm calling Regan here for the robbery of your gold shipments!"

The room froze into a tomblike silence at his announcement. Regan's eyes hooded like a cobra's. There was the same unfathomable stare there, nothing to hint of what the owner was thinking.

"You're crazy," Regan almost whispered.

"The way you whanged me on the head this forenoon, maybe I should be," Clint said. "Only it so happens I got the goods on you this time."

"I still say you're plumb loco," Regan stated coldly.

"You better take it easy son," Hollister advised from where he sat statuelike, his hands gripping the table edge. "After all, Thorpe Regan is the one who is making my mine a paying proposition."

"A paying proposition so he can live

his own pockets," Clint snapped. "The more he took out of your tunnels, the more he could rob from you."

"You got the drop on me now," Regan said, tight-lipped. "Prove your palaver or give me a chance for my iron."

CLINT faced Hollister. "Last night you heard me accuse Regan of smelling like kerosene. He claimed he knocked his lamp over and spilled the stuff on himself that way. I just come from his place. He never had an accident like that. The lamp chimney is still black and sooty from use and not broken. And there ain't any kerosene smells or stains on the table."

"And with that evidence I'm supposed to be a stage bandit," Regan suggested icily.

"You wanted to destroy that saddle with the hideout pouch," Clint stated. "You knew it was a secret between the three of us and you couldn't see any other way to stop our plans so you decided to burn me out."

Thorpe Regan heaved to his feet. "Hollister," he said, pointing a finger at Clint, shaking with suppressed rage. "I warned you about this young hellion this morning. He's cached your gold some place and is trying to frame me. I told you he might never return. Myself. I spent most of the day in shaft number six, me and Mike Tarrant. We was inspecting the seepage there and the amount of muck."

"You lie," Clint rapped. "It was Mike Tarrant who helped you dump me into Indian Creek. You two took the Old Angel Trail short cut to head me off. Tarrant's hood slipped and I saw his carrot-colored hair. He's also responsible for that short-fused stick of dynamite exploding in Hollister's convoy that time. You wanted to make it look like I'd skipped the country with Thad's dinero. Your scheme backfired, hombre, and you're it."

It was Thad Hollister's cry of warning that caused Clint to duck. He fell flat as a shot roared out behind him. The slug whistled by overhead and caught Thad Hollister in the shoulder. The mine owner crashed over backwards onto the floor. Clint heard him fall, but he never saw for he was twisting about like a huge cat, pulling trigger at redheaded Mike Tarrant who had entered the room.

Tarrant, a squat barrel-like man with a brick-hued face, let out an angry cry as Clint's bullet furrowed across his right cheek. He spit blood and sent another leaden messenger screaming at the young saddle maker. The death pellet grazed Clint's ribs and sent a shower of wood splinters needling into his face. Clint squeezed metal again.

A blue hole appeared with magic suddenness in Mike Tarrant's freckled brow. His eyes popped froggishly. One second he weaved, then slowly folded up like a huge ruler. Fascinated, Clint watched him go down.

"Clint!"

Clint whirled at the anguish in Thad Hollister's voice. Across the room Thorpe Regan was trying to pull his six-shooter from his armpit holster. Somehow the hammer had become ensnared in the lining of his calfskin vest. He was cursing, snarling like a cornered lobo wolf as he tried to free the weapon.

Clint started to press trigger, hesitated, and dropped his gun instead. The primitive urge overpowered him, a savage desire to get Regan within the clutch of his bare hands. Quickly he reached down, grasped the end of the bearskin rug upon which Regan stood and gave a mighty yank. It whipped the rug from under Regan's feet and sent him spinning just as he cleared his gun. The mine foreman's first shot went wild, hitting a corner of the stone fireplace and zinging angrily into the cedar-raftered ceiling.

Clint wanted to break the lamp into bits, plunge the room into darkness and escape Thorpe Regan's murderous fire. But he was too far from the lamp which sat on the fireplace mantel. Only one hairbreadth chance presented itself. Clint took it.

Coiling his legs beneath him, Clint dove forward with all the power of his bunched muscles. It happened so fast that Regan could only flick his eyes at the hurtling body already on him. The outlaw's legs were swept from under him and his gun went sailing into a corner of the room where it exploded harmlessly. The impact of their bodies crashing onto the floor rattled the windowpanes.

THEY rolled wildly across the room, crashing into the table and splintering a leg off as if it had been a mere

toothpick. Clint felt Regan's fingers coil about his throat. He clamped his jaws and bashed his head against the other's chin. The clawlike hands released their grip, and as quickly took a throttling arm lock about Clint's neck. It was a hold that had the sinewy strength of flesh-made steel.

Clint twisted and squirmed, trying to escape from those banded muscles. Blood began to pound in his head. His neck veins corded with the strain. Thorpe Regan's tobacco breath breezed against his ear. And now things were reeling—even above the thrashing beat of his feet on the planked flooring. It was the same lightheaded feeling he had experienced only that afternoon on his downward fall into Indian Creek. Maybe if he relaxed things would ease up. And with that dim thought Clint Farrel knew he was almost done for.

That fear-gutted tonic spurred Clint to life. With all the dying power at his command, Clint doubled his fists and rammed his elbows into Regan's stomach. Pained air wheezed out of Regan with that jarring blow. His hold loosened, and at the same time Clint jackknifed into a forward roll that brought the mine foreman under him. That did the trick.

Clint staggered to his feet, lungs working like fire bellows as he swayed drunkenly in the room. He saw Thorpe Regan, his hawkish nostrils flared, come charging at him. Clint knew he must evade that tackle. Only he was too weak. Clint's brain worked feverishly and he took a desperate gamble.

Just as Regan rammed his body at Clint, the young saddle maker dropped flat, raised both feet and caught the renegade square in the stomach. At the same time Clint propelled the other headlong into the leaping flames of the fireplace. Sparks showered like a bursting rocket as Regan crashed into the open maw. He squealed like a trapped rabbit.

Regan piled out of the fireplace, clawing frantically, his flaming hair giving him a devilish appearance. Glowing wood coals fastened to his shirt and vest, clung leechlike to the palms of his slapping hands. An acrid odor of burnt hair mixed with the powdersmoke smell in the room.

Regan was frothing at the corners of his mouth by the time he got the fire beaten out. He raised his hands when he saw the forty-five held menacingly in Clint's grip.

"Keep supporting the ceiling," Clint intoned softly. "Make one false move and I'll drill you like I would a coyote."

Clint turned to Hollister where he had propped the old man comfortably on the bearskin rug. "I'm deliverin' this jigger down to Sheriff Tompkins," he said tersely. "I'm thinking you won't have to be worrying none any more about your gold shipments. I'll bring Doc Teasedale back to patch you up."

"Might be you could bring Ann Selby back to act as a nurse to the both of us," Thad Hollister suggested, grinning faintly. "You ain't exactly so pert, and the two of you will help keep me company."

Clint grinned broadly. "Sure, Thad, if that's the way you want it," he said, then passed outside after his prisoner.

Thad Hollister looked after Clint's receding form. "If that's the way you want it," he snorted. Shore he did, only more so. He couldn't go too far wrong to take a man like that in for a partner. Someone to kind of tend to things while he took it easy-like in his declining years. Too, it might kind of be a wedding present for the two kids.

Cut a Notch for Dan

By Joseph Chadwick

(Continued from page 33)

She placed the fifty-five cents on the counter, then got down from her stool. She looked at Dan Meager and said, "Drop around to the Circle-V ranch, Dan, if you ever get time."

She walked from the restaurant and out of Dan's sight. But it occurred to Dan Meager that she had departed with some pleasant assurance in her manner. Bonnie Vance had seemed very much like a woman who, knowing what she wants out of life, suddenly knows for sure that she will have it for herself in the end. Dan Meager picked up his counterfeit dollar. He flipped it into the air, deftly caught it as he said half aloud, "Heads—or tails." He knew the toss would direct him to the circle-V ranch.

Gun Talk at Whispering River

By Joe Archibald

Ben Jaffe figured he'd put away his star and sixes forever—until an avenger from the past called the turn to square a pistol pard's bullet debt.

CHARLIE GOODLIFFE looked at the shiny badge that had been tossed to the top of his old roll-top desk, then up at the tall square-jawed man who had taken it off his shirt. "Looks like you mean it, Ben," old Charlie said, and sighed deeply. "We won't git another sheriff like you in a hurry. Guess there ain't many left who would have stood up against Red Yorke. What you figure on doin', Ben?"

"Don't rightly know," Ben Jaffe said. "One thing I'm sure of, I want no more sheriffin'.

He looked out through the fly-specked window that afforded a view of the corner of the clapboard building where he had shot Red Yorke, and felt a slight chill run along his bones. It had happened only a few hours before. Yorke, one of the few professional gunmen left in that part of the West, had come into town and had sent word to the sheriff that he was going to kill or be killed. Ben Jaffe had

driven Yorke and his crooked wheel out of Triangle only two months before, with the help of a dozen prominent citizens, and Yorke had said he would be back.

The shooting was still something of a nightmare in Ben Jaffe's mind. He had walked down the street with the breath of death against his face and wondered if he would ever see the stars shine again. Yorke had come around the corner of the building and his foot had slipped a little in the mud just as he drew. Ben Jaffe was certain that it had been the difference even as he shot Yorke.

"Hate to see you leave Triangle, Ben." Charlie Goodliffe picked up the lawman's badge and tapped it against the desk-top.

"Figure to buy me a little outfit somewhere," Jaffe said. "I'll live longer, Charlie. Standin' up for a man's own rights is one thing; standin' up for the rights of everybody else in a community is another. Sooner or later—"

"I see what you mean, Ben. An' nobody's goin' to question your courage, not the way you stood up against Yorke. I wish you much luck, Ben."

"Thanks." Jaffe grinned and took Goodliffe's gnarled hand. "What time does a train leave over at the sidin'?"

"I'll look it up, Ben. I'll hitch up and drive you over. That train goes as far as Slade. Stage will pick you up there—say, you got time, look up Andy Fancher in Slade. He's the sheriff there. Say I told you to."

"I might do that," Jaffe said. "I'll go and pack, Charlie."

LATE that afternoon, Ben Jaffe boarded a train and settled into an old red plush seat, pulled the brim of his hat down over his eyes. He planted both feet down on his old bulging Gladstone bag, and felt a brief pang of regret as the train pulled out.

Well, he had done the right thing. If he had stayed on in Triangle, he would see Red Yorke lying face down in the street every time he passed the corner of that clapboard building, and sooner or later Red Yorke's friends would have come in and made an attempt to square things for the gunman. There was something a man had to consider besides his pride; there was this uselessness of living by a six-gun. The knowledge that he had become as proficient as most men in their use had never stirred him.

A Colt could give a weak and wicked man the advantage over one who was strong and straightforward in all his dealings. A single bullet from one could swing an election the wrong way or change the destiny of a cattle empire over night. There was a power in a gun that undid the Lord's work. Ben Jaffe, however, still had his gunbelt strapped around him. He felt partly undressed without it, and besides, there were men running free or who would soon run free, and then all had a reason to want to kill him.

It was a long and tiresome ride to Slade. Late the next afternoon Ben Jaffe walked stiff-legged along the boardwalk to the frame building housing Slade's saloon and hotel. He got himself a room, all the while observing the few hangers-on in the small lobby. Upstairs he washed the grime and soot from his face and hands, and shaved his lean jaws clean. For three hours he slept, then was awakened by a confused roar of sound that seemed to come from up the street. He had heard a similar sound once before. There was only one sound like it in all the world, the cry of an unruly mob. Jaffe felt a singing along his nerves as he dressed quickly and strapped on his gun. He went down the stairs and out into the street. A woman hurried by, her eyes wide with fright.

Dusk had settled down over the town. A light blinked in a window across the street. Jaffe caught a man by the arm and spun him around. "What's up?" he asked brittlely.

"Hell's broke loose, that's what!" the oldish, fat man said. "They're after Roy Kahr. Fancher's got him in the jail an' they want him, Mister. They are goin' to string that killer up—they got a pine log an'—"

"Fancher!" Jaffe said, and started running. He could see them up there in front of a low frame and stucco building. They were bunched together and moving out of the shadows cast by a giant locust tree, their voices blending into a sinister, threatening wash of sound that gradually stepped up its tempo. Out of the roar came a thundering voice:

"We want 'im, Andy. We are goin' to get him!"

Jaffe hugged the sides of the buildings as he made his way to the jail, thinking what a fool he was, yet realizing that a lawman's instincts were too deeply root-

ed inside of him to brush aside at a moment's notice. And Fancher was a good friend of Charlie Goodliffe's. He jumped up to the narrow porch before anyone was aware of it and a voice roared, "Get away from there, you blasted fool!" A six-gun's echoing roar followed quickly on the tail of the warning, and splinters flew from a post close to Jaffe's head.

Jaffe heard Fancher yell at him as he answered the fire. A man out in the street screeched as a bullet tore through his leg. He tried for his gun again and Ben Jaffe dropped a heavy slug into the ground an inch from his groping fingers. The mob fell back, the element of surprise having its way with them.

"The name's Jaffe!" Ben said to the bulky figure who stood on the porch, a Winch cradled in his arms. "Was sheriff up at Triangle for Charlie Goodliffe. You need help, Andy."

"Sure," the sheriff choked out. "But you've set them off, you harebrained idiot!"

"Roy Kahr," Jaffe said. "He's got this comin', Fancher. Why risk your skin for a rat like that?"

"Even a rat has a right to a fair shake, Jaffe!" Fancher said.

BEN JAFFE grinned crookedly and watched the mob out there bunch together again. Two men helped the injured one over to the walk, and one of them ran for a doctor. How long ago was it? When had he heard that observation before? It was the time he had walked into a feed store in Triangle and had seen the owner with a shotgun in his hands. A big rat stood in a corner, and there was a gangly kid shoving the man with the scatter-gun aside and yelling, "He ain't got a chance, Pa. Even a rat has a right to one. I'll get him with a stick."

"Chicken-hearted, Ben," the man with the shotgun had said. "The kid likes everythin' in the way of animals. He won't even kill a rattler unless it bites him. He's got three white rats up at the house."

Ben Jaffe had watched the kid give the rat a chance to scurry past him. He had brought the stick down against the rat's neck as it leaped toward a pile of empty middling sacks. It had been quick . . .

"Right, Fancher," Jaffe said, even though he would like to have seen Roy Kahr hang in the next moment. Kahr had forfeited every right to live during the past two years. He had killed a dozen men, they said, and one had been a sheriff up in Montana. This Roy Kahr was one of the fastest gunmen left in the West. Some said he was the fastest. Once free again, Kahr would certainly see to it that more graves were filled.

Fancher said, "Sneak back in and make sure that killer isn't up to somethin', Jaffe."

Ben Jaffe went inside, crossed the floor of Fancher's small office and went through a heavy door leading to the jail itself. He saw Kahr sitting on a bench in a far corner. He could not make out the man's features. Kahr said, "They'll tear this place apart. Gimme a horse and let me make a break. I ain't got a gun." His voice was hoarse and streaked with fear. "I don't mind goin' out by a bullet, Mister. But to get a rope around my neck—"

"We'll try an' hold 'em," Jaffe said. "I wish I'd never wore a star, you skunk. Does somethin' to a man. He has the letter of the law stamped inside his head an' it behooves him to risk his own skin so's a hellion like you can git a trial."

"Who are you?" Kahr asked in a small tight voice.

"Don't matter," Jaffe said. He knew his own features were mighty plain to the doomed man. He was standing under a smoky lamp fitted into a wall bracket. The sounds outside swelled again and he hurried out. The mob was pressing closer and Andy Fancher was holding his scatter-gun in an alert position. Ben Jaffe guessed that there were not many armed men in the bunch, or Fancher's life would have been worth much less than it was.

"Once more, Andy. Do we get Roy Kahr?"

"You don't, Frank! An' I'll let you have both barrels if you put a foot on this porch."

"I'll put a hole through any man who makes a try to shoot the sheriff!" Ben Jaffe said. "We got law here or we haven't."

"This ain't your fight, stranger!" a tall cattleman protested angrily.

"Reckon I think different. Andy Fancher is a friend of an old friend of mine," Jaffe shouted. "You touch a part of him and I figure you'll wish you hadn't. Go back! Kahr will hang when a

jury finishes with him. You need patience, that's all. A couple of days at the most—"

"The man is right, Frank," someone called out. "We have gone a little loco. Take that log away."

ANDY FANCHER breathed a sigh of relief and let the stock of his shotgun clump against the boards. The mob scattered slowly.

Ben Jaffe said, "Who was it I winged, Fancher?"

"Dan Hurst, Ben," the sheriff said. "Don't matter much. Dan's a troublemaker an' this'll kind of soften him up. This is the first time I had a chance to thank you, Jaffe."

"Forget it," Jaffe said, and felt a weakness come over him. Always, after he was forced to use a six-gun, the reaction was not easy to bear. He followed Fancher into the office and dropped into a chair. Fancher filled his pipe, went in back to look at Kahr, then returned and sat at his desk. "Be glad when we finish with that killer," the sheriff said. "Tomorrow afternoon, we try him, Ben."

"What time does the stage leave in the morning, Andy?" Jaffe said. "I've made up my mind to go down south a ways and see what I can pick up in the way of a small cattle outfit. Investment of about seven thousand, Fancher. An uncle of mine left me some money couple of months ago."

"You quit the sheriff's job you had?"

"Sure did, Andy," Jaffe said. "A man's future is uncertain—if he's my age. When did you pin on a badge?"

"When I was fifty," the lawman grinned. "I see what you mean. Gunmen don't git much glory out of shootin' holes in an old barrel, Ben. Know it ain't got a chance in the first place."

"No offense meant, Andy," Jaffee grinned. "Not toward a man who could face that mob like you did."

"If I was young, Ben," Fancher said, I'd go down to the Whisperin' River country. In a stage of development. Only one big ranch there. Knew a man who was foreman for the Lazy J down there. Lot of chance for a man with get-up-an'-go, he told me. The stage goes as far as Lone Oak. You could get a bronc there."

"Thanks," Jaffee said. "Sounds like a good steer, Fancher. Sorry I can't wait over for the ceremonies, but somehow I hate hangin's or seein' a neck broken. Saw a rat with a broken neck once. Often wondered if the kid had missed that rat, would the beast have shown any gratitude?"

"Huh?" Fancher asked.

"Just thinkin' back, Andy," Jaffe said. "Out loud. Talkin' to myself ag'in, which reminds me I'd like to settle down with somebody before it's too late. Just haven't seen anyone—"

Andy Fancher grinned. "Keep lookin', Ben. Life ain't worth a candle without womenfolk around."

Jaffe got up and stretched. "Think I'll go over to the hotel, Andy. That clerk lied to me when he gimme that room. Said there wa'n't a single cockroach in the hotel. He was right. They are all married an' got heaps of kids. I'll drop in before I go, Andy."

Ben Jaffe got aboard the stage at seven-thirty the next morning. Andy Fancher handed him a big package. "Knowed you would forget, Ben. You ain't used to riding stages. Sandwiches, Ben. And apple pie. Have luck."

"Thanks, Andy." The driver cracked his whip and the stage rolled out of Slade and blew dust in through the doors that were open along the main street. Passing the jail, Ben Jaffe saw a man sitting on the porch, a rifle over his knees. The man looked asleep.

The stage rolled into Lone Oak six hours later and Ben Jaffe got out and loosened his cramped body, swiftly appraised the bustling little cattle town. He went into the saloon and got himself a drink and inquired about real estate operators.

The barkeep said, "Harry Murton. He's the man to see, friend. Up the street, over the dry goods store."

Murton had a small cluttered office. He was a fat and indolent man. He was wedged in a big armchair, shirt open at the neck, and fanning flies with a folded newspaper.

Jaffe said, "I'm looking for a small ranch, Murton. One that has room to grow."

"You came to the right place, Mister," Murton grinned, and picked some papers off his desk. "A place has been waitin' for the right man. The Drag 7. Maybe three hundred head of cattle, some fair-to-middling ranch buildings, good grazing land and plenty of water. Ownie Dell will ac-

cept a reasonable offer. Ownie picked it up when he was too old. We could ride out there this afternoon."

"The sooner the better," Jaffe said. "Where can I buy a bronc?"

"Ownie has a couple of good horses," Murton said. "I didn't get your name, my friend."

"Jaffe—Ben Jaffe. Was a sheriff for three years. I'd as soon forget it, though."

"You get the dust off you and feed yourself," Murton grinned. "I'll have my rig ready in about an hour."

THE Whispering River country was all spread out before Jaffe when Murton's buckboard reached an eminence two miles south of Lone Oak. The panorama quickened the beat of his heart and he knew this was where he wanted to be. There were dark green swatches of timberland breaking the pattern of the undulating topography, climbing up to little heights and down again into darkling glades.

Just below where the rough road crossed a corduroy bridge, the branches of century-old trees dipped their foliage into the waters of a curving stream. Pungent smells rose out of damp, fern-filled hollows and the sun drew perfume out of the pine branches along the edge of a canyon and drove it deep into Ben Jaffe's nostrils. Six miles beyond, Jaffee saw cattle grazing. A horse and rider became outlined against the sky.

Murton said, "Bradded L stock. Lige Greenough. His outfit's the biggest here, Ben."

Murton bore to the left at a point where the road forked. The buckboard slanted steeply downward and Murton applied the wheel brakes. Down below, possibly three miles distant, was a cluster of weather-beaten ranch buildings.

"That's it," Murton said. "A little paint is all it needs. Buildin's are sound enough. Corral needs a little fixin', the well cleaned out."

Harry Murton called to a tall thin man with white hair when he drove into the yard. He dispensed with preliminaries and said, "Ownie, this is Ben Jaffe. Interested in buyin'. Let's go in the house."

Jaffe was the owner of the Drag 7 just two hours later. Ownie Dell said he would pack up and go by noon of the next day. "You got four good hands, Ben," he said. "The foreman, Sid Kroll, can tell you everythin' you want to know, an' you can trust him all the way. If I was young like you, Ben, you'd never bought this place. I'd fire the cheffie if I was you, an' get somebody who can make biscuits a man can lift. How about a drink, Ben?"

That was the way it was. Just before noon of the next day, Ben Jaffe was estimating the amount of whitewash he was going to need to fix up the buildings when two riders came in through the gate. One was a middle-aged man with a big wart on his face and a twinkle in his gnomish eyes. He rode over to Jaffe and said, "You're a new hand? Where's Ownie?"

Ben Jaffe heard the question abstractedly. He was looking at the girl on the bay horse and he never remembered seeing one before who had been able to disturb him. He had seen them more beautiful, but always they had lacked the qualities he favored beneath the surface of their beauty. Her skin was browned by the sun. There was a smattering of freckles over the bridge of her nose and little beads of perspiration glistened around her full strong mouth.

"You're new here? I'm Chick Boley, foreman at the Bradded L," the corpulent rider said with impatience. "This is Miss Lucy Greenough. Where's Ownie?"

Jaffe said, still looking at the girl. "Ownie is packin'. I'm the new owner, Ben Jaffe. What can I do for you?"

"Well, I'm a ring-tailed Sioux Indian," Boley grinned. "Kinda hoped somebody with gumption would grab off this place. If I'd had a little more money, I'd—"

The girl got out of the saddle and held out her hand. "Glad to meet a new neighbor," she smiled. "We came over to buy a Brahma Ownie wanted to sell."

"I'll have to look at the bull," Jaffe said. "Maybe I won't want to sell." He kept looking at her, knowing at last he had met the girl he wanted to marry. Lucy Greenough did not seem to resent his unmistakable expression of approval. She was observing carefully on her own, but was the first to take her eyes away. "Boley, we'd better let Mr. Jaffe make up his mind. We'll be around again."

"I hope so," Ben grinned. "I'd like it a heap if I could return the compliment."

"You're welcome any time, Mr. Jaffe." The girl got on her bay horse and rode out with Boley. At the gate she turned

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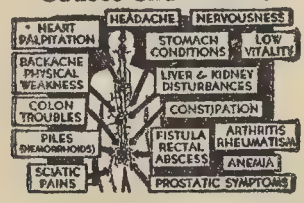

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in her saddle for another brief glance at the new Drag 7 owner.

"Yeah," Ben said. "This is where I belong."

TWO months later, the Drag 7 buildings had taken on a new face. Ben Jaffe had made other changes, particularly in his personal appearance, and one night he went over to the Bradded L and found out just where he stood in Lucy Greenough's plans for the future. He rode away with her promise in his heart and with Lige Greenough's blessings. The stars that night were brighter than they had ever been. There was music in the little voices of the night creatures and there was a song in the wind.

It was late the next afternoon when Ben Jaffe met the thin, sallow-faced man on the black horse. He came around a bend in a narrow road with Sid Kroll and another cowpuncher and nearly collided with the men.

"You happen to be Ben Jaffe?" the thin man said, a twist to his thin mouth. He yanked his bronc to a stop.

"The same," Ben said, fascinated by the lack of any trace of friendliness in the man's beady eyes.

"I'm George Ide."

Jaffe said, "Which means nothing to me, friend."

"I was a friend of Red Yorke's," Ide said. "I see you don't wear a gun, Jaffe. You throw it away with your star?"

A chill played along Jaffe's bones. "Red Yorke? It was a fair fight, Ide."

"That's neither here nor there, Jaffe. You killed him an' I know how fast Red was. Somethin' happened in the way of luck for you to beat him to the draw, Jaffe."

"Look," Jaffe said. "I haven't a gun, Ide. But we can settle it once and for all with our fists."

George Ide laughed softly. He shook his head. He lifted his hands and splayed the fingers. "These hands are too delicate to break against your skull, Jaffe. No, I'm goin' to kill you with a six-gun, Jaffe. I'll hound you until you have to grab up that gun of yours. You either stand up to me or I'll run you out of this part of the country. That plain?"

Ben Jaffe nodded. "Plain enough, Ide. I'll be around."

George Ide said, "When you're ready, you'll find me in Lone Oak." He rode on

and did not bother to even look back.

Sid Kroll sucked in his breath. "George Ide. I've heard of him, Ben. Fast as light with a gun. What you figure on doin'?"

"I don't know, Sid," Jaffe said, his world crumbling around him. "Few weeks back, I'd know what to do. Only myself then."

"Leave that gun where it is," Sid Kroll said. "We'll talk to the sheriff, Ben."

"No good," Jaffe said, a sickness taking hold of him. When he rode into the ranchyard, a puncher waved a big sheet of paper in front of his eyes. "Got it in Lone Oak, Ben. The sheriff was tackin' 'em up. Reward dodger. Roy Kahr. Got loose from a jail up north, in a town called Slade. They finally figured to give a reward for the cuss."

Jaffe asked in a toneless voice, "Kill anybody gettin' loose?"

"Banged a sheriff over the head, the story goes," the puncher said. "Takes news a long time to git to this neck of the woods."

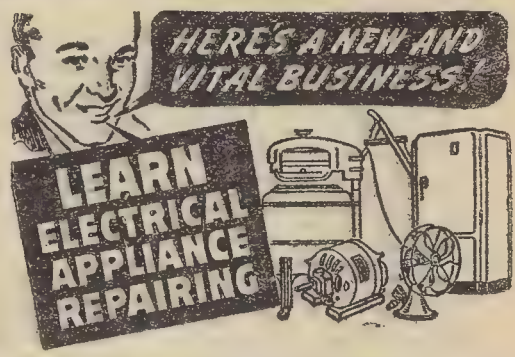
"Yeah," Ben said. "Give a rat an even break—"

He went into the house, his shoulders sagging, and looked at the gunbelt hanging on the wall. He had said he wouldn't ever use it again. He walked over and took it off the peg, carried it to a chair near the fireplace. He drew the Colt from its bullhide holster, broke it and spun the cylinder. It needed a little oil. He went to work and put the gun back in shape, slipped six cartridges into place and then dropped it back into the holster.

Tomorrow the Colt would be swinging at his hip. Tomorrow night he was going to Lone Oak. A man had his pride and it occurred to him that he would sooner die than lose it, even thought it meant the wrecking of another life besides his own. Lucy need not have to know—not yet. He knew the girl would persuade him to break and run. She would only have to remind him what he was going to lose if he chose to stay and see it through.

JAFFE rode into Lone Oak the next night and took a stand near the town's blacksmith shop. He knew Ide was aware of his presence in town the moment he had turned his bronc loose. Ide would soon make his appearance.

The time dragged and Jaffe's nerves tightened until they seemed about to



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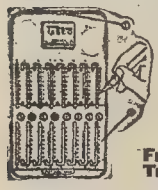
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snap and he felt the urge to call to Ide as loudly as he could yell. He walked up and down, conscious of the dread air of expectancy that hung over the town. People stared from windows, through open doors. But Ide did not come. Jaffe got into his saddle close to eleven o'clock and was riding out when George Ide called to him from the walk.

"Got in a poker game, Jaffe." Ide grinned. "My luck was holdin' an' I didn't want to leave. Sorry to've brought you in town for nothin', friend. But the next time—"

Ben Jaffe sensed the type of man this killer was. He was ruthless, cold and calculating. He was content to break down a man's nerve before he made his kill. He was a cat playing with a mouse. Ben fought back a violent temptation to force the issue here and now, but got control again and rode out of Lone Oak. George Ide's laughter carried after him. He was about to swing back when Sid Kroll and another rider rode out of an alleyway and pinned him between them.

"No, Ben. A man riled can't shoot worth a damn. We'll find a way to down Ide without—"

"Not your fight," Ben Jaffe said. "No need of more than one man gettin' a slug through him." He relaxed in the saddle, took a deep breath and sleeved sweat from his face. "I'm all right. Let's get goin'."

The word spread throughout the countryside. Ben Jaffe knew there were only two things he had to do. Kill or be killed, as simple as that. His neighbors had heard about his killing Red Yorke when he had been sheriff up at Triangle, and they evinced little doubt as to the confidence they had in him.

But Ben Jaffe knew he had no chance against Ide's lightning-swift draw. He lay awake nights cursing the senseless code that had come with the six-gun. A man was killed. The killer had to pay. When he paid, a friend took up the bloody trail. It was a vicious, damnable circle that had to be broken.

Ben Jaffe was combing the windbrakes for strays with Kroll one afternoon when Lucy Greenough rode out of a string of timber and called to him. He met her halfway up a long slope and suddenly read the fear in her eyes.

"Ben, I can't stand it any longer. We've got to go away or there'll be nothing for

either of us. If you should die, there's nothing left to me." She clasped her hands over her face and began to cry. Ben leaned out of the saddle and put an arm around her.

"Look, girl," he said. "Sure, we could run. An' later on, even if Ide didn't follow, you'd lose all your respect and love for me. As time passed you'd see a man who had run away, every time I came into the house. It would start showin' in your eyes, Lucy. That I would not be able to stand. I got to play the cards like they've fallen. What I've got here is worth the chance I got to take."

"Ben, have you a chance?" the girl asked, her eyes uncovered and swimming with tears. "Just a chance?"

"There's always one," Ben Jaffee said. "Lucy, I ain't aimin' to run away."

"Father said you wouldn't," Lucy said, her voice muffled by his shoulder. "He said it would come out all right. He said there was too much good in you to let the Lord stand alongside a killer like Ide. It's all I have to go on, Ben. My prayers—"

"Pray hard, Lucy," Ben said and lifted her chin and flashed her a smile. "I don't down easy. Now you ride along home. There's a storm comin' up. I got work left to do."

Ben Jaffe sat in his saddle and let the first drops of rain pelt his cheeks as he watched the girl ride into a dark swath of timber. He called loudly to Sid Kroll.

AS BEN JAFFE rode toward Lone Oak, he was sure this was the night. Sid Kroll had said as he left the yard, "The best of luck, Ben." The other punchers had decided against going into town. They had stood in front of the bunkhouse, saying nothing, an expression in their eyes promising destruction to a certain man if their boss failed to come back.

"Anything happens to me, Sid," Ben had said to Kroll the night before, "get in touch with my sister. She lives in Cheyenne. Address in the book in my desk."

It was a clear night and the stars were very bright overhead. Not the kind of a night a man wanted to die. Riding along, Jaffe wondered just how fast he really was with a gun, if Ide's prowess had been built up along the way. He was a man whistling in the dark. Ide had gunned down men like Sam Basser and Luke

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Short. Jaffe felt the bite of a cold gust of wind that boomed down off the buttes.

Lone Oak's main street was crowded when he rode in. A man stared at him, turned and walked swiftly away. When he finally walked out of the livery stable, the street had begun to empty and once more the tension built up and the run of talk along the walks faded to comparative silence.

The stage was being set. The gallery waited breathlessly for the grim show to start. Ben Jaffe, nerves stretching taut, walked slowly across the street toward Lone Oak's restaurant. His eyes swept the dark maws of alleyways and lightless open doors. He felt his own heart pound, was aware of his short and steady breathing.

Faces swam in the smoke-filled open doorway of the saloon as he walked past. He looked across the street and saw that the lawman's office was dark. A grim smile played on his lips.

A Bradded L puncher walked hurriedly past, said, "How are you, Ben?" and ducked into a doorway.

Jaffe reached the end of the street, turned and walked slowly back. Ide would be watching. The cat was playing with the mouse; sure of herself, her beady eyes flickering somewhere in the dark. Ide would come out when he figured his man's nerves were near the breaking point. Ben Jaffe finally cried out in a hoarse voice:

"Come on, Ide! Come on!"

And then Ide came out, walking with no sound, his feet hardly stirring the dust. He threw the stub of a cigarette away and walked slowly toward Ben Jaffe.

"A nice night, Jaffe," Ide said, "for this kind of play. Tell me when you're ready, Jaffe!"

He knew now how it felt to be standing on the brink of eternity. He realized how thin the wall between life and death. He stopped and was about to call for the showdown when a voice came out of the dark slit between the livery stable and the wheelwright's shop. It pulled George Ide's head around.

"Who's that?" Ide said.

A man stepped out into the thin lamplight. He was tall and loosely built. His face was in shadow, but Ben Jaffe was sure he saw a pair of bright burning eyes.

The man said, "So you're the great Ide?"

"What is this, friend?" George Ide ripped out. "You keep your nose out of this."

"Been shootin' off your big mouth, Ide," the voice said. "A salty bucko who thinks he can live by his mouth alone. What was it you said, Ide? You'd like to meet up with that Roy Kahr?"

"Kahr?" George Ide spread his hands wide and bent forward as if trying to get a look at the face under the wide-brimmed black hat. "I never said—"

"You never? I figure you're a liar, Ide!"

Ide stiffened. Ben Jaffe staggered to the side, caught at a lamppost and held on. Roy Kahr in Lone Oak—looking for Ide?

"What are you trying to do, Kahr?" Ide asked, his voice high-pitched and deadly. "You forcin' me to go for you?"

"You catch on easy, Ide," the killer from up-state mocked. "I'm sick of hearin' what you can do with a gun. What you'd do to Roy Kahr if you crossed his path. Well, I'm here to be shown, you yellow-livered skunk!"

Ben Jaffe got to the walk and made his way to the doorway of the saloon. "Looks like I have to wait, men," he said.

ROY KAHR took two steps toward George Ide. He called Ide everything that was mean and rotten. He goaded Ide to fury and suddenly struck for his gun. George Ide pitched toward Kahr, his six-gun throwing lead. Jaffe saw Kahr's bullet hit Ide, and he knew Ide's first shot had not been entirely wasted, for Kahr was knocked backwards and he hit the ground in a sitting position.

Kahr fired again. George Ide's breath seemed to be torn loose from his body and he went to his knees. He pulled himself erect and staggered clumsily across the street, firing two more shots. Kahr had rolled over on his stomach and was emptying his Colt at Ide.

"Come on, George! Come on!"

Ide suddenly stopped as if hit by a heavy sledge. His knees bent under him and his arms dangled helplessly at his sides. He spun half around, his wide eyes and opened mouth turned toward Ben Jaffe, then collapsed into the dust. Kahr laughed liquidly, then rolled over on his back as if he wanted a last look at the bright stars.

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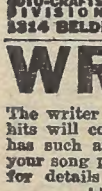

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Ben Jaffe ran out into the street, a dozen men at his heels. He turned George Ide over, saw that he was gone. Roy Kahr grinned when Ben leaned over him.

"Howya, sheriff? Heard Ide was gunning for you—sort of remembered you give me a break—wanted to see how good Ide was anyway—found him good enough, huh? He went first—don't forget that."

"Get a doctor!" Jaffe yelled.

"Don't waste your time," Roy Kahr forced out. "I still got a gun. Nobody stretches my neck with a rope—I'll kill whoever tries to plug these holes up."

Ben Joffe saw Roy Kahr's eyes glaze. The Colt fell from his strengthless fingers and dropped against his chest. A dry rustling sound came from his throat.

"Dead," Ben Jaffe said.

He got up and shook his head slowly. His world was safe and sure and he would look up at the stars of thousands of other nights. Lucy Greenough would be with him. The wind came down into Lone Oak and whipped up the dust and blasted it against the facades of the frame buildings, as if it wished to wipe things clean.

"Both wiped out," a man said. "Reckon this'll make a lot of other killers think, Ben. Sooner or later, men will find out the world will be better without guns."

"Yeah. I'm thinkin' of a kid I knew once—one who gave a rat an even chance for its life. Kids have a lot of wisdom, my friend. Makes me feel kind of good to know Kahr had a grain of gratitude in him. I want you to bury Roy Kahr decent. He gave me all that was left to me in this life, just when it seemed certain I'd lose it."

"Just as you say, Ben."

Ben Jaffe rode over to the Bradded L early the next morning. Lucy was in the garden in back of the ranch house cutting flowers for the table. She came running and threw himself into his arms.

"I sat up most of the night—waiting, Ben. And praying!" She began to cry and laugh, giving vent to her great joy.

"Strange," Ben Jaffe said. "The kind of people He sends out in answer to prayers—sometimes. I guess He don't always use angels to carry out His work. Now let's go and sit down and figure out the plans for the addition on that house of mine. How would I know what a kid's room should be like? Especially it if should happen to be a girl."

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